

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
**THE TRAIL OF THE
MILLION-DOLLAR VIOLIN**





in

**THE TRAIL
OF THE
MILLION-DOLLAR VIOLIN**

A valuable antique violin is stolen from a wealthy movie producer. Shortly thereafter, he receives a message demanding an extortion payment, accompanied by vague directions to the designated handover location. In response, he enlists the services of The Three Investigators to facilitate the exchange. With time pressing, Jupiter, Pete and Bob set off on a lengthy drive to the canyons of the Colorado Plateau. Along the way, they encounter dodgy characters who are seemingly after the money they are carrying—banknotes amounting to one million dollars!

The Three Investigators
in
The Trail of the Million-Dollar Violin

*Original German text by
Ben Nevis*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Geister-Canyon

(The Three ???: Ghost Canyon)

by

Ben Nevis

(2005)

Cover art by

Anonymous

(2025-10-04)

Contents

- 1. “The Guarneri is Gone!”**
- 2. The Letter**
- 3. A Challenging Assignment**
- 4. The Journey Begins**
- 5. Saved by a Rat**
- 6. Dirty Tricks**
- 7. Jupiter Breaks into a Sweat**
- 8. “See You at Midnight!”**
- 9. Canyon at Night**
- 10. Ghostly Encounter**
- 11. Where is Pete?**
- 12. A Huge Problem**
- 13. Operation Backpack**
- 14. Showtime!**
- 15. Face-to-Face with the Extortionist**
- 16. Playing Tag**
- 17. A Score to Settle**
- 18. *La Serva del Signore***

1. "The Guarneri is Gone!"

It was a nice quiet day at The Jones Salvage Yard in Rocky Beach. Jupiter Jones was at the outdoor workshop where he tinkered with all sorts of stuff. He had just switched on his soldering iron and was about to solder a copper wire back onto the blender he was repairing when his aunt Mathilda appeared next to him.

"There's a visitor for you, Jupe," she announced. "There's a man in the yard who wants to see you."

"On what business?" Jupiter asked back briefly. Actually, he could not be bothered right now as he was focussed on fixing the blender.

"He wouldn't tell me what it was about," Aunt Mathilda replied, annoyed. "Besides, I'm not your secretary, Jupe! What I can say is that he came in an expensive limousine that is so swank that it will have problems turning around in our yard. Then he acted mysteriously and said that he wanted to see you and no one else. What are you involved in now?"

"Nothing, Aunt Mathilda! Really, I haven't the faintest idea!" However, Jupiter's curiosity was suddenly aroused.

Over the years, he had developed a keen sense for when a new case was brewing for The Three Investigators. In fact, they desperately needed a new case. After all, the long Memorial Day weekend lay ahead of them, and Jupiter simply had no brilliant idea of what to do with the three days off. "Aunt Mathilda, can you please get Pete and Bob? I'll go meet the ominous visitor."

"—But Pete and Bob are cleaning up the storeroom!" Aunt Mathilda didn't move. "This was agreed upon a long time ago. I know how it will turn out. In the end, you'll be gone, like always, and the mess will still be there!"

"Aunt Mathilda! Please! Maybe the chance of a lifetime is waiting outside!" Jupe exclaimed.

"I'm sceptical about that, my boy. The more expensive the car, the more dangerous it is!" She stepped aside to let Jupiter pass. If Jupiter had got something in his head, she knew that he was unstoppable, at least not without being confronted with his bad mood later on for days.

Curiously, Jupiter stepped out of the workshop and went to the yard. Aunt Mathilda had not exaggerated. The white limousine was so long that it would have problems turning around and getting out. Hollywood stars, or those who thought they were, were often seen being chauffeured around in such cars.

A man was waiting in front of the limousine. In spite of the heat, he wore a black suit and tie. Sweat glistened on his high forehead. When he noticed Jupiter, he took a few steps towards him.

"Paul Hendry," he said, reaching out his hand. His eyes looked cool and the position of his chin gave his face a crooked look. "So you are..."

"Jupiter Jones." Jupiter wiped his hands on his T-shirt and returned the greeting. "—And over there, we have Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews, my friends and colleagues."

"Ah! The other two investigators," said Mr Hendry, with a straight face.

"So what can we do for you?" Jupiter asked.

"I can't tell you anything about it." The man made a defensive gesture. "I am Mr O'Sullivan's butler and chauffeur. He told me to bring you to him. He wants to talk to you personally about everything."

In the meantime, Pete and Bob had rushed up and two questioning looks met Jupiter.

"A Mr O'Sullivan wishes to see us," Jupiter explained the situation to his friends.

"—Wishes to see you," Mr Hendry made a curt correction. "Your two friends were mentioned, but he specifically asked me to bring you alone."

"Just me?" Jupiter frowned. "Then I'm afraid the meeting will not go well. It'll be the three of us or none at all... right, fellas?"

"That's how it is," Bob confirmed. "It's not for nothing that we call ourselves 'The Three Investigators'!"

"Please give Mr O'Sullivan our regards," Pete added. "It was a pleasure to hear from him."

"Good, then that's settled," Jupiter said. "If you'll excuse us now, we have a lot of work to do..." He turned to go back to the workshop.

"Well, thanks for dropping by, mister!" Pete said while Bob waved goodbye to Mr Hendry. Both of them then made their way back to the storeroom.

"Wait... Wait a minute, please," Mr Hendry said.

The three boys stopped. They hadn't gone far yet.

"You... you can't..." the man stuttered as he slowly followed them. "Mr O'Sullivan was just... Well, he has to keep it as secret as possible! He... he needs help! Get in the car, please! All three of you. It's all right."

Jupiter smiled to himself. Of course, he had hoped that Mr Hendry would give in.

"All right, sir! The three of us are in! By the way, could you kindly tell us who this Mr O'Sullivan is, who wants to see us so badly?"

The man was visibly surprised. "You haven't heard from him yet? I work for Frank O'Sullivan, the famous movie producer!"

"Oh, that O'Sullivan!" Jupiter nodded. He had suspected that, but he liked a confirmation. "Then we're going to Beverly Hills?"

"You said it," Hendry confirmed. He stepped up to the limousine, opened a side door and pointed to the interior of the luxuriously equipped vehicle, without being able to hide the fact that he did not like The Three Investigators.

With a worried look at the dirty jeans of Bob and Pete, he added: "Please be careful sitting on the light leather of the car seats. Maybe I'd better put a blanket for you to sit on..."

Pete and Bob tapped a little on their pants. There was visible dust.

"Well, you came unannounced, otherwise we could have dressed up for you," Pete said casually. "By the way, do you want me to guide you out of the yard? Your car is quite long, and the traffic—"

Hendry shook his head. "For situations like this, there are cameras mounted at the back of the car."

The Three Investigators threw themselves a meaningful look and got into the car.

The spacious luxury they suddenly immersed themselves in surprised even the investigators, who after all were used to Worthington's Rolls-Royce. Everything was of the finest quality. The eyes of the boys swept over the latest technical gadgets, which left nothing to be desired. Jupiter was most impressed by a retractable on-board computer.

"You can help yourselves in the bar," Hendry's voice sounded over loudspeakers, "but please leave the alcohol untouched!"

“As if we...” Jupiter mumbled, shaking his head. At the push of a button he let the drinks out. They each chose a soda.

Hendry backed the limousine up and stopped briefly at the junction to the street to allow traffic to pass. Jupiter could see the outraged look of Aunt Mathilda, who stood at the entrance of the yard office and watched her helpers leaving—just as she had foreseen.

Once the limousine was on the road, Hendry accelerated.

The journey went along the coast. In Pacific Palisades, the driver turned to Sunset Boulevard which led directly to Beverly Hills.

After some time and countless bends, Hendry turned left onto a nice side street lined with tall palm trees on both sides. Here, secluded in park-like grounds, lived the rich and famous—directors, movie actors, musicians, and among them was Frank O’Sullivan, one of Hollywood’s great movie producers.

Hendry stopped in front of a wide gate decorated with wrought ironwork. For the entire journey, he had not said a word to The Three Investigators.

“We are here,” he now announced. The gate slid open and the limousine rolled slowly along a path bordered by green bushes, leading to a large turning circle, at the side of which a stately villa rose.

A man waited on the steps. He was perhaps in his fifties. His short, colourful shirt hung casually over his loosely fitting white jeans. The Three Investigators knew his face from the newspapers.

“There you are at last, Paul,” said the man as the driver got out and opened the door to the back of the limousine. “Oh, three of you...”

“I’m afraid that’s the way the gentlemen wanted it, Mr O’Sullivan,” Hendry replied. “I figured I’d better bring all three of them, rather than none at all.”

“Good, Paul. Thank you. All right, investigators, I’m Frank O’Sullivan. Let’s go into the house!”

With hurried steps, the movie producer crossed the spacious reception room and headed for a door opposite the entrance. “My library,” he said, waving The Three Investigators inside.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob curiously entered the room. They had still not received the slightest clue as to what it was all about, but it was obvious that Mr O’Sullivan was under a lot of pressure. He didn’t say a word about his library, which he could have, as it was full of interesting-looking books, reels of film, videos and CDs, but most of all, between the elegant shelves, were many glass cabinets on the wall displaying musical instruments. On one table, there were three closed violin cases.

The producer pointed to a tasteful seating arrangement. “Please take a seat... and if you want a drink, please help yourself.”

On a glass side table, there were water and juice. O’Sullivan waited until his guests were seated, then he sat opposite them in an armchair.

“I’m glad it worked out so fast!” He took a deep breath and leaned back. His perfectly drawn facial features relaxed a little, and it seemed as if a weight was lifted from him. Jupiter wondered if the producer had had a face-lift, as his skin was so tight.

“So you’re The Three Investigators,” O’Sullivan said and looked at them one by one. “Every now and then, I read about your successes in the newspapers.”

Jupiter nodded, pulled out one of their business cards as if on cue, and handed it to the producer:



“Good. I think I owe you an apology for only wanting to speak to Jupiter, because as few people as possible should know about my little secret... but I now see that you work as a team of three.” He smiled. “I really hope all of you can keep quiet about it.”

“In our business, respecting client confidentiality is one of the basic prerequisites for success,” explained Jupiter. “You can trust us completely, Mr O’Sullivan. Perhaps you could now tell us the reason for this impromptu invitation.”

“Of course.” The movie producer leaned over. For a moment, he looked for words. “Now that you are here, I suddenly don’t know how to begin...” he finally said. “I need your help. The Guarneri is gone!”

2. The Letter

“Guarneri? What is that?” Pete asked, but to his surprise, Jupiter, not O’Sullivan, answered his question.

“It’s an antique violin,” said the First Investigator, “an extremely rare instrument whose value easily reaches a staggering sum.”

Mr O’Sullivan gave Jupiter a very impressed look. “I knew why I asked you here,” he said. “You’re just brilliant!”

“This connection was not particularly difficult to make,” Jupiter explained. “For one thing, I noticed the numerous musical instruments which you have in here, including the three violin cases on the table over there. This gave me the hint that the name ‘Guarneri’ refers to a violin made by Bartolomeo Giuseppe Guarneri. As I understand, some of his instruments are even more valuable than one of the better-known Stradivarius violins. In one of our previous cases, we had the great honour of saving a Stradivarius from destruction.”

“To be more precise, it was Jelena who caught the violin and saved it from being smashed to pieces,” Bob added, alluding to Jelena Charkova, a friend of The Three Investigators whom they first met in *The Mystery of the Devil’s Music*. She played the violin excellently, and her father was Sergei Charkov, a music professor at the Santa Monica Conservatory of Music.

Mr O’Sullivan nodded understandingly, even though he had no idea what it was about. “I am happy to sit across from such experts,” he said. “Then you can imagine how vulnerable such a violin is, and you can understand how painful it is for me to know that it is now in the wrong hands... but one thing at a time. The Guarneri is on loan from one of my friends, Fredrik Lindgren.”

“Fredrik Lindgren? The actor?” Pete wondered aloud.

“Yes, the actor,” Mr O’Sullivan confirmed. “He bought the violin from an auction in New York some years ago. It is called ‘*La Serva del Signore*’.”

“*La* what?” Pete asked.

“*La Serva del Signore*,” Mr O’Sullivan repeated. “‘The Servant of the Lord’ in English. It is named as such as it has to serve the right master—meaning, the right player. Only when the player is truly good does the violin reveal all its beauty... otherwise, its sound is ordinary,” O’Sullivan explained.

“Wait a minute, Mr O’Sullivan,” Bob interjected. “May I ask, why do you want a violin on loan when I presume that you probably have a few yourself?” He pointed at the three violin cases on the table.

“Ah!” Mr O’Sullivan remarked. “The Guarneri is for my upcoming movie, one where I am the producer and also the co-writer of the story. You might have heard of certain movies using genuine antiques or valuable art objects as props to add a layer of authenticity and value to the final product... for example, in the movie *Stuart Little*, a genuine painting was used even though at the time of filming, nobody knew that it was a very valuable painting. There were also movies that used real jewellery instead of glass copies.

“In any case, this movie of mine centres on a brilliant violinist and her rags-to-riches rise to stardom. Of course, it involves a very valuable antique violin. I can’t really reveal to you

too much of the storyline as it is still in the filming stages. However, what I can tell you is that I, being a collector of valuable musical instruments, have insisted on using a genuine antique violin for the filming. Incidentally, I can't find any that are good enough, so I arranged to get the Guarneri on loan.

"Fortunately, all the scenes featuring the Guarneri have been completed, and the crew is now on a two-week break before resuming work on the rest of the movie. I have had the Guarneri kept here in my library in the course of the loan, and as an avid musician myself, I have played this wonderful instrument many times. Believe me, it's a dream... just by playing it..." He leaned back in deep thought.

"—But now the instrument is gone, as you said," Pete interrupted O'Sullivan's digressive recollection. "Was it stolen?"

The movie producer sat up again. "You're absolutely right, Pete. It was stolen... but what would a thief do with a Guarneri? He can't sell it in the collector's market. The violin would be immediately recognized as a stolen item. There are very few instruments in the world made by Guarneri. This luthier lived around the time of Stradivari. He was a gifted artist. His instruments are perhaps not quite as precise, but in the end they are even more ingeniously built than those of his famous counterpart.

"—But enough of the infatuation! Unless such a theft is committed on behalf of a collector, the thief can hardly turn his loot into money... so he has come up with something particularly nasty—he has demanded a huge payment for the return of the violin."

"Oh..." said Pete, "so it's an extortion."

Bob finished his drink and put the glass back on the table. "—And now you want us to get the violin back?"

"In a way, yes," O'Sullivan said.

"How much money is the extortionist asking?" Pete asked.

O'Sullivan cleared his throat. "Well... one million dollars."

"Whew!" Pete gasped.

"Actually, the Guarneri is worth even more—from my estimates," O'Sullivan said contritely. "It is irreplaceable, but fortunately the thief doesn't know that. He's got a million dollars on his head and he wants it."

"Have you informed the owner yet?" Pete asked.

"No," O'Sullivan replied. "Actually I am still very taken aback by what happened. I was hoping to recover it and not have to report to Fredrik."

"So is there a letter from the extortionist?" Jupiter concluded from what had been said so far.

O'Sullivan nodded. "I'll show you in a minute... but even the theft is a mystery to me—" He interrupted himself and nervously looked to the side. A shadow flashed across the window.

"Oh, that's just Paul," he said. "I've been terribly agitated since the theft."

Jupiter had also noticed that the butler had made himself busy on the terrace. He had just dragged a hose, probably to water the plants. Strangely, he was still wearing his suit.

"How long has Paul Hendry worked for you?" asked the First Investigator.

"For many years," O'Sullivan replied and then paused. "I see your point, Jupiter, but if you suspect Paul is involved, then you are wrong. I trust him completely. Sure, Paul would have access to everything, but no... As far as I am concerned, he is completely trustworthy."

"What about the filming crew?" Bob asked. "I'm sure someone would have known that the violin is very valuable."

“Yes, some of them, but not all,” O’Sullivan said. “In all the scenes that were shot with the violin, I was there. I made sure that all care was taken for its safety.”

Jupiter nodded and left it at that for now. “Where was the violin kept?”

The producer pointed to a glass display cabinet that stood on the side of the wall. “It was in there. The cabinet is made of armoured glass and its opening mechanism is secured by a code.”

The Three Investigators got up and inspected the crime scene. The glass was unbroken. The thief must have cracked the code.

“Who knew the code besides you?” Jupiter asked.

“Only I knew that,” O’Sullivan replied. “Of course, I often have visitors, and I may not always have paid attention to whether they were looking over my shoulder when I opened the cabinet... but what is much worse—” He interrupted himself and looked out of the window as if he could find the continuation of his sentence there. Outside, the butler had turned on the sprinklers. Actually it was too early in the day for that, Jupiter thought.

“Yeah?” the First Investigator tried to get O’Sullivan to continue.

“I just remembered something... Two days ago, I took the Guarneri out to change the chin rest to a newer one that I had just bought... uh... I’m not sure I even activated the code after that.” O’Sullivan drew in a sharp breath. “If nothing ever happens, you get careless...”

“The insurance company might not like to hear this,” Jupiter said thoughtfully. “The violin is insured, isn’t it?”

O’Sullivan nodded. “I took out an insurance policy for it immediately after I got it on loan.”

“When did you discover it was gone?” Jupe asked.

“Yesterday... morning, in fact.”

“Is it easy to get on your property and into your house?” Bob asked after Mr O’Sullivan replenished their drinks and they sat down again.

“My security system is very reliable. You can check it out later.”

“I suppose you have not reported this to the police,” Jupe surmised.

“Yes... Let’s discuss everything calmly... but first I want to show you this...”

O’Sullivan pulled out a green folder that had been lying unnoticed on an end table. It contained a single sheet of paper which had been placed in plastic wrap for protection. Carefully he took it out. “The extortionist’s letter,” he said. “Paul found it in the mailbox yesterday morning. I suspect that it was placed there just after the theft.”

Curiously, The Three Investigators bent over the paper that O’Sullivan had placed in front of them on the glass table. The text was written by hand, but the perpetrator had used a thick felt-tip pen and chosen block letters to hide the conspicuousness of his writing. The text was concise and unmistakable:

*ONE MILLION DOLLARS
UNMARKED, CLEAN BANKNOTES
NO POLICE
ONLY ONE MESSENGER—A BOY
SATURDAY 1 PM
OTHERWISE VIOLIN WILL BE GONE!*

“May I?” Jupiter asked and reached for the paper.

O’Sullivan nodded, and Jupiter read the text again. Then he turned the page over. On the back was a computer print of a map and three photos. The map had the words: ‘Zion National

Park'. The first photo was a general view of a canyon. The second showed a road leading into a tunnel in a mountain. Finally, the third photo was of a stony slope, on the upper edge of which there were four boulders of different sizes.

"So the handover location is the Zion National Park," Pete noted, "but the park is huge, and the map here only shows a small area. How are we to figure out where it is?"

"I have no idea," O'Sullivan said desperately.

"Wait a minute!" Bob exclaimed. "This second photo—I recognize it! I remember going through a tunnel there once with my parents, just like the one in this photo. It's the Zion-Mount Carmel Tunnel, and I know where it is!"

"Then that narrows it down a lot," Pete remarked.

"The three photos were taken within the area shown on the map..." Jupiter added, "and the third photo gives the specific location. There's a cross marked on one of the boulders—here!"

"Mr O'Sullivan," Pete continued, "I don't know what reputation precedes us, but we can't do magic. Today is Friday. By tomorrow afternoon, the extortionist wants the money. That's just 24 hours!"

"Yes, I know," O'Sullivan said. "I don't care who did it. There's still time. Above all... I want the violin back."

"The violin? But we need to find the thief for that!" Pete said.

"—Or give him a million dollars..." Jupiter said quietly.

Bob's gaze changed from Jupiter to O'Sullivan. "You're not thinking of... entering into this deal, are you?"

Wordlessly, O'Sullivan got up and went to an elegant desk facing the window on the other side of the library. At one of its legs was a large metal briefcase. When he lifted it, they could see that its contents had some weight. O'Sullivan carried the briefcase, pushed the extortionist's letter aside and carefully lifted it onto the table.

"The Servant of the Lord is unique," the movie producer said. "Even though I don't own it, I hate to see a masterpiece like that getting into the wrong hands. In addition, how could I even tell my friend Fredrik?"

O'Sullivan cleared his throat extensively. Then he opened the briefcase locks, which sprang open with a slight click. "Please look inside," he said.

Pete bent over and opened the lid all the way. In the briefcase were bundles of dollar banknotes!

3. A Challenging Assignment

“Madness!” Pete cried and his eyes lit up. He had never seen so much money in one heap before. “I’m sure it’s...”

“Exactly one million dollars,” said Mr O’Sullivan. “Each bundle has one hundred pieces of \$100 banknotes. You’re welcome to count it.”

Pete was still fascinated by the sight. Each bundle of banknotes was fastened with a rubber band. He took one bundle out and flipped through it with his thumb. “—And you just want to hand over all this money?”

“There’s no question of want,” O’Sullivan said seriously. “—And it’s not me, it’s you who’s handing it in. That’s exactly what I want you to do.”

“Let me get this straight. You... you want us to take this money—a million dollars—go off with it and... and give it to the extortionist?” Pete stuttered.

O’Sullivan laughed, albeit briefly. It was the first laugh he let out since The Three Investigators were with him. “That’s why I chose you. You are trustworthy. You’ve proven that many times.”

“Why don’t you deliver the money yourself?” Pete asked back.

O’Sullivan pointed to the extortionist’s letter. ‘ONLY ONE MESSENGER—A BOY’ was written there.

Jupiter nodded. “The extortionist is being incredibly careful,” he said. “He lures the messenger into an impassable, but for him, a manageable landscape—the one in the photo. Only one person is allowed to go there—someone he wants to be physically superior to. If a boy is chosen, it is impossible that it is a disguised police officer. A boy also would not be carrying a weapon. All this suggests a single perpetrator who wants to protect himself. Possibly it is also a woman.”

“—But we are no longer boys,” Pete said with a hint of indignation in his voice.

“On the other hand, we’re not really adults either,” Bob replied calmly. “Hasn’t that helped us in many situations?”

“Yes, people like to underestimate us,” Jupiter added with a smile on his lips. “Yes, the extortionist may accept one of us. After all, you can’t put a six-year-old in such a situation.”

“You’re right,” Pete said, “so which of the three of us would be handing over the money?”

“I was thinking more of Jupiter, your leader,” O’Sullivan said emphatically, “and I won’t hide the fact that the task is not as safe as it may seem. Can the extortionist really be trusted? What happens if something goes wrong? Maybe it’s a good thing there are three of you. After all, you’re handling a million dollars... if you’re even willing to take the job...”

“How about it, fellas?” Juve turned to his two friends.

Both Pete and Bob nodded.

“Mr O’Sullivan, we’ll accept the assignment,” Jupiter announced.

“I read somewhere that you don’t charge a fee,” O’Sullivan said, “but if you bring me back the violin, a nice donation will of course be made available to your investigation agency. Maybe you need a new computer... or a better camera.”

“We’ll get the job done first,” the First Investigator said.

With a look at Jupiter, Mr O'Sullivan said: "Thank you very much. I knew that I could rely on The Three Investigators!"

Jupiter nodded absently. He had already caught fire. "First we have to find the exact handover location," he said and picked up the extortionist's letter. "It shouldn't be that difficult as the extortionist wouldn't want to put any obstacles in our way."

"—But this task needs to be carried out tomorrow. In any case, we've lost a lot of time already," Bob remarked. "Mr O'Sullivan, did you say that you received this letter only yesterday morning?"

"That's right," the movie producer confirmed. "Yes, it was yesterday. I was really scared when I held the paper in my hands. I had to think about how I should react... but it was immediately clear to me that I shouldn't take any risks. That's why I want to buy the violin back."

"I also had to think about where all that money would come from. Although I have considerable funds, a million dollars is of course not just lying around in my living room. Withdrawing that much cash took me some time. Fortunately, when I was at my bank, no questions were asked."

"Then I was faced with a much bigger problem due to the demand for a boy for the payment handover. I had to take a person into my confidence... but whom? I myself have no children. I couldn't go to my neighbours... Until this morning, by a happy coincidence, I had the idea to go with you. I came across an old newspaper article about you three. I don't know what I would have done if you couldn't or wouldn't take the job... I would probably have gone there myself."

"In any case, we better determine the exact location of the handover," Juve decided. "Mr O'Sullivan, do you have any books or maps for Zion?"

"Of course I do." O'Sullivan got up and walked to a bookcase that contained several large volumes. After a short search, he came back with an illustrated book about Zion National Park. The three boys immediately scanned the park map in the book.

"The tunnel in the second photo is right here on the map," Bob pointed out. "You can also see that the area around here matches that shown in the extortionist's map."

Then they only needed to leaf through the book for a short while to establish beyond any doubt, the locations shown by all three photos.

"Most importantly, the third photo shows the exact handover location," Jupiter said with hunting fever in his eyes. "—The boulder marked with the cross. With this settled, the next issue is getting there."

"I estimate it will take eight hours of driving, with short breaks," Bob said. "The park is in the Mountain Daylight Time zone, so the handover at 1 pm there is 12 noon in California. Working backwards, we should start no later than 4 am tomorrow morning."

"At four in the morning?" Pete asked, startled.

"I'd rather you left today," O'Sullivan said emphatically. "If there's any delay while you're driving there, the violin would be gone. I do not want to bet on the patience of the extortionist."

"There is hardly anything to counter this argument," replied Jupiter. "We wanted to take advantage of Memorial Day to go for a spin anyway. Let's go today."

"Agreed," Bob said. Pete also nodded.

"Wonderful!" The movie producer seemed so relieved that he looked a few years younger. "Of course you will be provided with a rental car, and I'll pay for your expenses! I think \$1,000 should cover it for now."

"How do we stay in touch?" Jupiter asked.

"I'd like to stay close to you at a safe distance." O'Sullivan studied the map. His left index finger ran across the major roads. "Maybe I'll check into a hotel in St George. It's reasonably convenient. We can communicate by mobile phone."

"Good... and how will I recognize The Servant of the Lord?"

The movie producer looked at Jupiter in amazement. "What do you mean?"

"Well, how do I know the extortionist will give me the right violin?"

"Oh! You think of everything, Jupiter!" O'Sullivan got up, went to his desk and opened a drawer. After some searching, he returned with a Polaroid photo. "Is this good enough? This is the most recent and accurate photo I have of it, as it was taken just after I changed the chin rest. I'd just like the photo back when you're done with it."

"Okay," Jupe said, took the photo and looked at it. It showed the violin being held upright by a hand, presumably Mr O'Sullivan's, grasping it at the top. The shot was not exactly very sharp, but it was taken up close.

"Uh... could you also tell me some unique distinguishable marks or visible features of this violin that set it apart from a typical one... so that I could focus on?"

Mr O'Sullivan then gave Jupe a detailed description of the colour, wood-grain pattern, body shape, tail piece, and the design of the sound holes.

"One can feel your love for the violin," Jupiter said and put the photo in his pocket. Then he thought of something else. "One more question—is Mr Hendry up to speed on everything that's going on?"

O'Sullivan's face took on an astonished expression. "Paul? I have no secrets from him, but..." the producer hesitated briefly. "Well, I'll probably go alone. Still, you don't think—"

"I just wanted to know," Jupiter said objectively.

O'Sullivan was silent.

"Nice." Pete closed the briefcase with a firm grip. "Then it's all settled. Let's get to work."

"Wait!" Jupiter said cautiously. "I don't think it would be wise to drive off with an expensive designer case that would attract attention even if it is empty. I suggest we put the money in brown paper bags."

"Paper bags?" O'Sullivan said in amazement.

"Paper bags—like those from a supermarket... as if we just bought spaghetti for our weekend trip. Three boys on a camping trip. Nobody suspects a thing... and yeah, pick a cheap rental car, Mr O'Sullivan—one that looks like nothing. We want to keep a low profile, otherwise your money will be gone before we even get to see Zion National Park."

Mr O'Sullivan looked at him appreciatively and pressed a button hidden under the table. "I knew I made the right choice with you."

A few moments later, Paul Hendry appeared. There were some water spots on his suit. "You sent for me, Mr O'Sullivan?"

"Paper bags. We need a couple of paper bags like those from a supermarket."

"Bags, of course. How many of them would you like?"

"Three," Jupe replied. "Two should be enough for our purposes, with one as an extra."

The butler nodded obediently and went off.

"It's best that we count the money again," Mr O'Sullivan said and poured the contents of the briefcase on the table, "not that anyone will say afterwards that the amount is incorrect..."

4. The Journey Begins

By mid-afternoon, it was all systems go. Mr O'Sullivan had arranged for a rental car. Paul Hendry had collected it and driven it to the salvage yard.

For the boys going on this long weekend trip, there had been no objections from Jupe's uncle and aunt, and Pete's and Bob's parents. It was a straight-forward trip to Zion National Park—only that the boys did not say what they were going to do there, and of course, what they were carrying.

Bob had been trying to contact Jelena a couple of times, but there was no answer. He then got the violin photo from Jupe and used his mobile phone to take a photo of it, and then sent it to Jelena. He asked her to help check on the instrument, including the auction in New York that O'Sullivan had mentioned. As a precaution, Bob did not give her any other details of the case they were working on—in particular, he did not mention that the violin had been stolen.

At about 4 pm, The Three Investigators drove off from the salvage yard, with Pete at the wheel. He was rather annoyed at Jupiter's requirement to camouflage themselves with the poorest possible vehicle. The steering wheel of the old blue Chevrolet had too much play, the air conditioner didn't work properly, and to make matters worse, the car didn't have a CD player.

"We'll just turn on the radio," Jupiter suggested. "There are enough stations here."

"In Los Angeles maybe, but later in the desert? There we can listen to the wind whistling through the rust holes! We could have taken advantage of O'Sullivan's generosity."

At Santa Monica, Pete headed east on Interstate 10. More than two hours later, they left San Bernardino behind them. It took much longer than planned. Tired of the heavy traffic, Pete left the highway and drove into a rest area. It was time for him to hand over the driving to Bob.

Pete parked the car a short distance from some trucks. The three of them got out to stretch their feet, but they did not wander off far so that they could always keep an eye on the paper bags that were placed on the back seat.

"It will be dinner time soon," Jupiter remarked with a glance at the horizon. "We should think about getting some food."

Bob's stomach growled too. "Unfortunately, when we left in such a hurry, you left Aunt Mathilda's packed dinner in your kitchen," he grumbled.

"That's because Pete wanted to pick out some CDs from me—CDs that we don't need!" Jupe quipped.

"Yeah, and that's because this car has no CD player!" Pete snapped back. "—And I suppose that is my fault as well?"

"Of course it's your fault! We have a long tradition of blaming you, Pete!" Jupiter smiled at Bob. "Isn't that right, Bob?"

Bob mumbled something unintelligible.

"Well, whatever you say." Pete sauntered over to Jupiter and Bob who were standing in front of the bonnet of the car. "You know what?" he said in a muffled voice and his eyes

flickered strangely. "I'm tired of these adventures we keep getting into... and they are dangerous too! We are always helping people out of sticky situations and getting nothing in return. How long are we going to keep this up?"

"I can hardly believe that it is a mistake to help other people," Jupiter remarked dryly.

For a moment, they looked at the sun, which had moved further towards the horizon.

"You're probably right, Juve," Pete said. "As always. 'Jupiter Jones is right' is also a long tradition with us." He patted Jupiter on the shoulder. "Come on, fellas, let's move on—to some fast-food restaurant. I'm famished!" He grinned and threw the car keys to Bob.

It took quite a while until Bob had found a suitable opportunity for a meal break. The traffic was still heavy. All of Los Angeles seemed to be heading east. In addition, huge trucks kept passing them. Then finally the sign of a fast food chain, shining brightly in the darkness, showed them the way.

Bob stopped the car in front of the restaurant and gave Jupiter a questioning look. "What do we do with the money? Are we taking turns to stay here and watch it?"

"Well, my stomach really needs filling," Juve said.

"I'll go along with that right away," Pete said. "I think we'll all go together and just take those bags inside."

They got out of the car, and Pete and Bob each took a bag. The knowledge of the valuable contents of the bags made them heavier than they actually were. All along the way, Bob and Pete cast sceptical glances at the surroundings, as if a man with a gun could be lurking behind each car, trying to snatch the bags from their hands.

Only Jupiter seemed to remain relaxed. "No reasonable person would attack three burnt-out boys," he growled when he noticed Pete's frightened look.

"—But who is reasonable these days?" Pete remarked.

Then the automatic door of the restaurant opened and a smell of food, cooled by the air conditioning, hit them.

Bob and Pete chose a place from which they could watch the entrance, while Jupiter, armed with a tray, took care of ordering the meals. They were such a well-rehearsed team that he had long known the meal preferences of his two friends.

Not long after, the food came in boxes, paper cups and wrapping papers. With ravenous appetites, the three of them raided the meal.

"Hey, our expenses are covered by O'Sullivan," Pete suddenly remembered, and he wiped a trickle of mayo off his face. "We could have gone out for a decent meal."

"—But don't forget that we have to save time," replied Jupiter, smacking his lips. "The traffic has slowed us down quite a bit, and it would be good if we could get even further tonight! Where is the you-know-what?"

The money! Bob and Pete flinched involuntarily and then pointed between them in relief. "It's on the seat next to us." They repositioned the bags so that Jupiter could see them too.

At the very next moment, Bob happened to look up and was briefly speechless. "Fellas, pinch me," he whispered. "Look who's here!" His eyes were glued to the entrance.

Jupiter and Pete followed his gaze. Their faces froze.

"Oh no! Dick Perry!" Jupiter gasped. "This can't be good!"

Dick Perry was a small, fat and very unpleasant private detective from Santa Monica. He had made life difficult for The Three Investigators with his obnoxious behaviour in a previous case—*The Mystery of the Jellyfish Virus*. His personality was as endearing as a

toothache. Every word that spilled from his lips was laced with an arrogance that could curdle milk.

As a spontaneous reaction, Jupiter whispered: "Heads down!"

Too late! Dick Perry had already seen them. He came towards their table joyfully. "So, the three youngsters from Rocky Beach, well, well," he called out across the tables. "Long time no see... working on another interesting case?"

Some of the customers looked around. As inconspicuously as possible, Bob slid the chair with the brown bags further under the table, but he did not succeed in hiding them completely.

With a smile that was difficult to interpret, Dick Perry walked nearer and glanced at an empty chair. "You don't mind if I join you?"

"Unfortunately yes," Jupiter interjected decidedly. With his foot, he nudged a chair leg inward to prevent Perry from taking the seat. From their last encounter with this chap, Jupe couldn't even bother if he had offended him.

"Thank you!" Like he didn't hear anything, Dick Perry grabbed the chair and plopped his chubby body on it. "Hot today!" He then used the back of his hand to wipe his forehead. Sweat was running down to his cheeks, which were round enough to store nuts for winter.

"What are you doing hanging around here anyway?" Jupiter asked. "I thought you were —"

"Dick Perry has friends everywhere who help him," the detective interrupted him cheerfully and smoothed off his tasteless tie, which he wore with his worn-out suit despite the high temperature. It was still the same suit as before.

"So you're working as a detective again?" Pete asked. "What is your slogan now?"

Before waiting for Perry to reply, Bob said: "I've got one for you: 'Want to hire a pest? Dick Perry is the best!'"

Perry sighed and wobbled regretfully with his roundish head blessed with only a few hairs. "Just as cheeky as I remember you," he said, "but let's get this straight... you're not here on holiday, are you?"

"Not at all," Jupiter answered calmly before Pete or Bob could say anything. "We are doing a photo report for the local Rocky Beach newspaper about environmental protection in the national parks. We are looking for rare animals and plants."

"A photo tour indeed..." Perry remarked, "and in that brown bag, there has to be your... uh... camera?"

Bob winced and moved back a little. He noticed with horror that one of the bags at the top had unfolded. Had Perry seen anything? Bob quickly squeezed it shut again. "There's food in there," he said. "Doughnuts to stuff a smart mouth with!"

In an instant, he regretted his harsh reaction. If Dick Perry was even remotely alert, he must have sensed that another story was unfolding... but at least, Perry didn't let on.

"What about you?" Jupe tried to change the subject. "Surely you are not on your way to the Grand Canyon to ride the Colorado rubber dinghy? I'd be amazed at your interest in adventure sports."

Perry laughed. "I admire your devious formulations, Jupiter, but I admire your ingenuity even more! I am also searching... for my happiness, so to speak—yes, you could put it like that..."

"Well, I guess it's clear... you still don't like me," he remarked, feigning an offended look. "—But please, my dear friends, save my seat. I have to go to the toilet and will be back shortly to continue chatting with you."

Dick Perry got up and walked away.

The Three Investigators exchanged a few glances. They had a wordless understanding—this was the chance! Now it was time to get Dick Perry off their backs as quickly as possible.

No sooner had the annoying detective disappeared than Pete and Bob grabbed the money bags and got up. Jupiter already paved their way to the exit. A man sitting alone looked at them suspiciously. He was wearing an orange baseball cap featuring the 'LA' insignia of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Jupiter hurried on, approaching a table near the exit where a family with three children was occupying. As the First Investigator tried to squeeze past their table, the youngest child pushed his chair unintentionally, but powerfully, into his stomach. Jupiter stepped back and felt Pete bump against him at the same moment. He turned around and just got hold of the money bag that had slipped out of Pete's hand. However, it was too late for Bob. He stumbled, and with a dull plop, the bag landed on the floor. Several bundles of money slipped out.

"Oh, no!" The Three Investigators bent down and hastily stuffed the money back into the bag. Hopefully no one had noticed anything, but when they looked around nervously, it seemed as if the sinister-looking man with the orange cap was quickly averting his gaze conspicuously.

"Let's go!" Jupiter whispered. "Quick!"

5. Saved by a Rat

“If we go on like this, we’ll soon have a whole pack of wolves on our necks who are keen on the you-know-what,” Pete burst out when they, gasping for breath, finally got back into the car.

The Second Investigator was behind the wheel again, and immediately drove out of the car park and accelerated away.

“I didn’t like that guy with the orange cap,” Bob said, as he too, was worried.

“—And why did we have to run into that disgusting pest?” Pete barked. “Do you think he suspected something?”

“It doesn’t matter, now that we’re rid of him,” Bob said, satisfied that they had come through the situation reasonably well. “In fact, we’re rid of everybody. What have we got to be afraid of?”

“That buffoon can’t be trusted! I’m sure he’ll turn up somehow!” Pete burst out.

“O’Sullivan will kill us if we lose the you-know-what.”

“The you-know-what now rests safely beside me... in two brown paper bags,” Bob said. “I’ll hold them like they were two babies.”

Pete drove towards a truck and switched to the left lane.

“Pete, is there any possibility that you are driving too fast?” Jupe asked and squinted from the passenger seat at the speedometer of the car. The needle was nowhere near where it should be.

“Of course I’m going too fast! I’m not looking forward to running into that fat goblin again.”

“If he still has the same old lemon as before, he’ll be tinkering with the starter for another hour anyway,” Bob tried to reassure Pete. “Wouldn’t you rather I relieve you, Pete?”

“You’d better hold on to the babies,” Pete barked back and flashed his headlights at a caravan that was definitely too slow for him. The caravan driver hectically changed to the right, and Pete rushed past.

For the next fifteen minutes, nobody said a word.

Then Bob, who had turned around from time to time to look through the back window, suddenly leaned forward. “Hey, Pete! Slow down! Now!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Police!”

“Oh, bummer!” Pete slowed down... but it was too late.

A police car approached from behind with flashing lights. When it was close enough, it gave out a brief but piercing yelp to signal to Pete to pull over to the right side of the road and stop.

Pete did as he was told and had the Chevrolet rolled out on the right shoulder at the next opportunity.

The police car also stopped, and two policemen got out. Pete rolled down the side window and put his hands on the steering wheel. “This can be expensive,” he said.

“Hopefully O’Sullivan will take care of the fine...”

“Hopefully they won’t search the car,” Jupiter said. His voice suddenly sounded not quiet at all. “What if they got a tip from somebody at the restaurant? How are we going to explain to the police that we’re driving around with the you-know-what? We go straight to jail if they discover the bags! No matter what we tell them, they’ll think we’re criminals! That would be the end of our assignment!”

Bob’s left arm was still clutching the paper bags. One of them had developed a crack as a result of the incident at the fast-food restaurant and it could not be closed completely. Of course, they hadn’t got around to getting the spare bag out of the boot and replacing the broken one.

“Quick, hide the two bags,” Pete whispered urgently.

There wasn’t enough time, as the very next moment, the first policeman appeared by the driver’s door while his colleague positioned himself behind the car.

“Turn off the engine!” the policeman instructed.

Pete obeyed.

“Driver’s licence, please.”

“I... Yes, right away, sir.” With two fingers, Pete slowly reached into his pocket. He had heard that moving too fast could be mistaken for pulling a gun.

“Three boys!” the officer shouted to his colleague, and then he turned to Pete and asked: “Is this a rental?”

Pete nodded.

“—And where are you going?”

“We are going... to the national parks...” stuttered Pete. “Zion National Park—a trip for Memorial Day.”

“Trip? Memorial Day, huh?” the officer muttered. “—And you’re going to Zion... this late at night?”

“No, sir, we’re staying in a motel tonight.”

“You have money for that?”

“Yes, sir, we’ll find a cheap motel.”

The officer nodded and looked into the car. It was clear that he did not trust three boys who were driving at too high a speed at night in a rental car heading for Las Vegas. “You two... your IDs as well!”

Bob let go of the bags and rummaged around in his jacket. He was sweating out of his pores, as he thought he could feel the policeman’s eyes caught on the bags.

“Here’s my ID,” Bob said and leaned forward, attempting to inconspicuously shield the two bags of money with his body.

“Thank you. Get out of the car, Mr Crenshaw, and open the boot.”

Pete breathed a sigh of relief. That had gone well. The policeman hadn’t seen the money. The Second Investigator promptly got out and opened the boot. The second policeman rummaged through the collection of sleeping bags and clothes.

Out of the corner of his eye, Pete noticed that another car had stopped further back.

“Everything is okay here,” said the second policeman, “just what boys have with them...” He closed the boot lid.

“Hmm...” His colleague nodded and looked as if he was satisfied with the information... but then his eyes fell on the back seat. “What’s in there?” He pointed to the bags.

“Foodstuff, sir!” Jupiter replied quickly from the passenger seat. A white lie was called for in their situation, even if they had the police alongside them. The First Investigator immediately shifted the focus of the conversation: “Regarding my friend’s driving, we just wanted to take advantage of the long weekend and drove a little too fast! We admit it!”

The policeman didn't bat an eyelid. "Give me that bag!"

Trembling, Bob's hands approached the first bag. Jupiter was right. If the policeman discovered the money, their assignment would be over. He would think that they had stolen it. It would take days to clear up the whole tangled mess—days that they could spend in a lock-up. Why didn't something happen? Now?

The policeman nodded at Bob impatiently. Bob held up the first bag and the policeman was about to open the car door to receive it.

"Hello, my dear friends!"

It was unbelievable! That was the voice of Dick Perry!

The heads of The Three Investigators turned around. A rotund figure came waddling up as fast as his chubby little legs could carry him. He had one arm waving frantically in the air, and the other jangling a bunch of keys loudly. It was a scene straight out of a circus sideshow—the only things missing on him were a red rubber nose and a goofy yellow dunce cap.

Never before had Bob imagined he would be pleased to see Dick Perry... but in that very moment, he was.

"My dear friends in the police force!" The clown's voice went all funny when he hopped up to the first policeman who was about to open the car door.

"I am a colleague of yours, so to speak—a very insignificant colleague, admittedly, but always on the right side! Here is my ID! I am a detective of my own making and always in the service of law and order!"

The Three Investigators ran out of air. What did that mean now? More amazed than impressed, the policeman, who had just wanted to inspect Bob's paper bag, took a step towards Dick Perry.

"So?" he asked, glancing at Perry's ID.

"These three boys here, they're fine, sir! They look after rare animals in the national parks! Didn't they tell you? Always a bit shy, these three—not wanting to brag about their good deeds! Their mummies hired me to protect them because they are worried about so many things that can happen to them in a different state. The boys obviously drove a little too fast, didn't they? The carelessness of youth, my dear colleague..."

Dick Perry laughed and put one hand on the policeman's arm, who was at least two heads taller than him. "Didn't we used to be like that? But you're right. Law and order! The best thing you can do is to take a few dollars off these boys and teach them a lesson!"

"I was just about to do that, Mr... uh... Perry."

"Wonderful! You're such a good cop! You know, I've worked with many of your colleagues—such helpful people! And they're always for law and order!"

"Mister! Will you please let me do my job now?"

"Why, certainly, sir!" Perry bowed slightly and took a step back.

The first policeman turned back to Pete, wrote a ticket, and handed it to him. The Second Investigator looked at the fine amount, and then stuffed the ticket into his pocket.

"Next time you'll get it right," the policeman said before turning around.

"I understand, sir!" Pete quickly reassured him and then got back into the car.

The first policeman gave Perry a suspicious look, and the detective returned with a slimy grin. Both policemen then got back into the police car and drove away.

The next moment, the sleazy detective stepped up to the Chevrolet of The Three Investigators and put his sweaty hand on the rim of the open window. "Well? Are we friends now?" he asked.

Pete did not react, but Jupiter replied with a sceptical tone in his voice: "So, I suppose your little assistance there was not selfless... or am I misjudging you, Mr Perry?"

“Jupiter Jones must only think so business-like! You don’t know Dick Perry very well, do you? No, I just wanted to help you! I have a pure heart! Help, my friends! It hurts me to see that you are in trouble!”

“We’re doing fine,” hissed Jupiter, “at least when we’re not being harassed by cops and detectives!”

“Detectives?” Perry laughed. “You’re referring to yourselves.”

“I was referring to detectives from Santa Monica,” Jupiter clarified, “if you’re still one.”

“Well, my detective badge is in fact a bit... outdated.” Dick Perry grinned. “—But the nice policeman didn’t notice that.” His gaze wandered through the interior of the car. “I’d be damned if I didn’t think your ill temper had something to do with what you’ve got in those two bags,” he said. “You’re clinging to them like it’s your retirement fund, aren’t you, Bob?”

Bob swallowed.

Jupiter used the moment and gave Pete a signal.

Pete nodded. “Goodbye, Mr Perry,” he called out, turned the ignition key and took off.

In the rear-view mirror, Pete saw Dick Perry puffed up like an offended pigeon, cursing after them and then scurrying back to his car in a hurry.

“That was a close call,” Pete commented, “I mean the thing with the police.”

“Imagine us being saved by a rat!” Bob added.

6. Dirty Tricks

“We won’t be able to get rid of that rat so easily,” Pete warned. “The attempt to outrun him by speeding is over. We won’t get off so lightly if the police stop us again. Dick Perry has us in his pocket. He suspects we’re carrying a secret, and he can blow the whistle on us to the police at any time.”

“—And we can hardly explain to them that we are on our way to the handover location of an extortionist and therefore we have a handsome sum of one million dollars with us,” added Jupiter. “In case of need, of course, we would have to tell the truth... but getting the job done has top priority, so we’ll have to live with Perry’s presence.”

Bob had turned around to check the traffic through the back window. “Our friend is already behind us!” he exclaimed. “He’s clinging on to us like a leech.”

Despite this information, Pete kept to the speed limit as he rolled along the freeway. “Then we change tactics. In an hour, we find a motel, check in and wave to him again in a friendly manner. Tomorrow we’ll have to find a good opportunity to lose him.”

“—But how?” Jupiter asked thoughtfully.

The trip was more complicated than he had imagined. On such a delicate assignment, they really didn’t need a sinister snoop who had the annoying habit of showing up at the most inopportune moments—even though Perry had saved them from the police. In hindsight, it was because of him that they got into this situation.

After a while, The Three Investigators saw a colourful motel billboard and Pete turned off the freeway. Dick Perry’s car followed them like a shadow.

A simple motel was waiting in the middle of a barren landscape surrounded by the dry bushes of the semi-desert. The building quickly got lost in the darkness under the poor lighting.

The Three Investigators checked in and were assigned a room. When they left the reception, Dick Perry, who had been waiting discreetly outside the door, winked conspiratorially at them.

They parked their rental car in front of their room and carried their luggage inside. The sparse furnishings made their dejected mood even worse. After a few minutes, The Three Investigators heard another car parking outside and shortly afterwards, the door of the neighbouring room was unlocked.

Bob could have saved himself a look outside. It had to be Perry’s old mouse-grey Ford parked next to their Chevrolet.

Pete immediately went to sleep. He dreamed of a man who looked like Dick Perry giving him a sack of money. Bob and Jupiter, however, had a restless night, especially with Dick Perry snoring loudly next door. A saw mill was nothing compared to that... and the walls were thin.

Tomorrow would be crucial. Not only did Jupiter have to hand over the extortion money, but before that, he had to figure out how to keep Perry from following them. In the worst-case scenario, that dopey detective could jeopardize the whole operation. Again and again, the First Investigator looked at the photo of the violin and memorized the appearance of the

instrument in detail. In between, he studied the map of the national park until he finally fell asleep out of tiredness—despite the saw mill still operating next door.

Around 5 am, Jupiter and Bob got up. Together, they woke up their dreaming colleague. “Pete! Dick Perry is still fast asleep! Let’s get out of here!”

As quietly as they could, the three boys got ready. Bob and Pete tucked their luggage under their arms while Jupiter grabbed the money bags they had put close to their beds during the night.

“Lights out, get out, throw the luggage into the car. I’ll drive and goodbye, Dick Perry,” Bob stated the simple plan to carry out in the next sixty seconds.

He then unlocked the door and pulled it open with a powerful jerk. Suddenly, a deafening jingling of bells made them collapse. It sounded like an oversized alarm clock that came straight from Dick Perry’s room. In shock, Jupiter dropped the bags and several bundles of money spread over the stained carpet.

“Sounds like the school break bell!” Bob said as he bent down to help Jupiter collect the money. The bell in the next room stopped. The snoring had also stopped, but now Dick Perry’s clumsy footsteps could be heard.

“Was this a coincidence?” Pete asked and looked outside. The cool air of the morning came in.

“No, definitely not!” Disappointed by the failed escape attempt, Jupiter gathered the last bundles of money. “It must have been some devious Dick Perry construction.”

“I don’t believe it!” Pete, who had stepped outside the door, found a thin string which ran along the outside of the wall and disappeared through the half-closed sliding window of Dick Perry’s room. “That guy used us as alarm clocks,” he remarked, stunned. “When we opened the door, we triggered the mechanism!”

At that moment, Perry’s window was pushed open all the way, and the face of the dopey detective appeared. In the dim light from the light bulbs mounted on the outside wall, he looked rather wrinkled. “You could have given me a little more sleep, my friends! But you’re very fortunate because—it may still be early, but Dick Perry is always ready!”

Disappointed, The Three Investigators got into their car. Only a few moments later, Dick Perry threw his small luggage into his Ford. Bob shrugged his shoulders, turned the ignition key and drove off.

Due to the early departure, The Three Investigators were well on time. Still early in the morning, they reached Las Vegas, in whose dense car traffic they tried once again to lose Dick Perry.

A city map was printed in Jupiter’s mind, so he could safely navigate Bob through the maze of streets branching out from Las Vegas Boulevard—the best-known street in the city, most famously known as ‘The Strip’.

Along the sides of the boulevard were the most popular of the big hotels. Each of them had adopted a familiar theme. Between countless taxis and cars, The Three Investigators drove past an Egyptian-styled pyramid, smiled at a cartoonish knight’s castle, and marvelled at an impressive replica of the Eiffel Tower of Paris.

However, when they left the gambling city on Interstate 15 heading northeast, the Ford reappeared in their rear-view mirror.

“The guy must have planted a tracking device under our car,” Jupiter suspected. “If we get a suitable moment, we’ll look for the device and simply attach it under another car.”

However, there was no suitable moment yet.

Almost two hours later, they entered the state of Utah which was on the Mountain Daylight Time zone, and they adjusted their watches one hour ahead. They rolled past St George, which reminded Jupiter to finally contact O'Sullivan by mobile phone.

The movie producer picked up the phone immediately. He sounded anxious, but calmed down when Jupiter assured him that everything was going according to plan. The First Investigator preferred not to talk about Dick Perry. This was a problem they had to solve themselves.

Just before 11 am, Pete, who had taken over the driving, reached Rockville, just outside the boundary for Zion National Park. Near a camp site, they found a snack bar and took a break. While Jupiter, Pete and Bob sat down under a shady awning, Dick Perry stayed in his car and sweltered in the heat.

After their hunger was satisfied, the boys' thoughts focussed on the upcoming task. Now it was time for Jupe to give a final briefing to his friends on what to do.

Jupiter took out the map of the park and unfolded it. "Here's the road tunnel that's shown in the extortionist's second photo," he said. His finger went along the map. "There are several designated parking areas near the tunnel. About here begins the hiking trail that leads to the gorge. Somewhere along the way, there seems to be a stony slope—the slope with the four boulders, and one of them is marked with a cross in the third photo."

"So you're really delivering the you-know-what?" Pete asked.

"Exactly!" Jupiter leaned forward and spoke more quietly. "—But before we hand over the you-know-what, we have to get rid of you-know-who—else he's going to mess up our mission."

"So what's the plan?" Pete asked.

"Pete, make your way to that shop over there by the camp site. At an appropriate time, we will drive off to try to lure Perry away. In the shop, you buy two simple backpacks. We will circle around here and in five minutes, we'll pick you up at the front of the shop. Then on the way to the park, we'll transfer the you-know-what into the new backpacks, and stuff some clothes into the paper bags.

"Once we're out of the tunnel, we'll stop at one of the parking areas and drop you off, Pete, with the two paper bags. Make sure Perry sees you so he'll come after you. Your task will be to distract and lure him away. Go anywhere, as long as it's not towards the right target."

Pete seemed to embrace the idea. "It will be my pleasure to lead Perry into the wilderness—through hedgerows and thorns. His suit will be but a rag..."

"As soon as Perry follows you on foot, we'll drive off and make a couple more turns," Jupe continued. "We'll park elsewhere, I'll get out with the backpacks, and go find the handover spot. Bob will follow me from a safe distance and keep an eye on things.

"So, after the handover, I will get back to the car, and we'll meet you, Pete, at the same place we dropped you at. You might have to wait a while as I do not know how long I will take."

They looked up involuntarily at Dick Perry. He'd just taken a big gulp from a plastic bottle.

Jupiter laughed. "There are three of us, so let's put a little pressure on him!"

Soon, it was time for The Three Investigators to execute their plan.

They left the snack bar. Bob and Jupiter got into the car, while Pete just took out his jacket and then strolled leisurely towards Dick Perry's Ford. The obnoxious detective had rolled down the window and stared sceptically at him.

"Hello, Mr Perry," Pete said lightly. "That's a pretty good snack bar over there where you can get some great refreshments... and it's pretty shady too."

"You didn't come here to talk to me about drinks," growled Perry. His eyes were now fixed on the car of The Three Investigators.

"Why are you following us, Dick?"

"—Because you greenhorns are too stupid to handle that kind of money! What kind of story are you mixed up in?"

For a moment Pete was speechless. "What money are you talking about?" he finally found his voice.

"Dick Perry isn't stupid, boy! At the burger joint, I came out of the toilet in time to see you amateurs fumbling all over the place, grabbing bundles of money from the floor. How much is it? Half a million? One?"

Pete again remained speechless.

"—And I'm certainly not the only one who knows about it..." Perry's hands were clutching the steering wheel, and he was looking straight ahead. "Did you notice that guy with the orange cap?"

"You mean the orange Dodgers cap?"

"Well done for being so observant."

"Anyone can get one of those caps," Pete barked. "What about him?"

"He followed you bunglers out and saw you all leaving in that rental car of yours."

"So what?" Pete retorted. "What we're doing is none of your business, so stay out!"

"Sheesh!" Perry hissed. "The way you guys handle those bundles of money—"

At that moment, Bob drove off. He splattered the gravel under the wheels and roared away. Dick Perry started the engine and went after the blue Chevrolet without saying another word. Pete stayed behind, surrounded by a cloud of dust and startled by what Perry had just said. That sleazy detective knew what they were carrying... along with the guy with the orange cap!

Then Pete remembered his mission. He crossed to the other side of the street, where the small shop was. As planned, Bob and Jupe arrived five minutes later and Pete got back into the car with the new backpacks.

"Dick Perry knows about the money!" Pete blurted out as soon as he got in. "So the incident at the restaurant didn't go unnoticed after all. He even said that the guy with the orange cap came out of the restaurant and saw us leaving in this car!"

"That's a big setback!" Bob exclaimed. "All the more important is that we get rid of that leech soon."

"—Or after we hand over the you-know-what, we don't have to bother with him anymore," Jupiter said. "He can do or say whatever he wants."

As Bob was driving to the national park, the annoying detective was back on their trail.

It was time to prepare the diversionary tactic. Jupiter turned to the back seat. "Let's get started. Transfer the you-know-what to the backpacks, Pete."

The Second Investigator promptly unrolled the simple backpacks he had purchased at the camp site shop and began to rearrange the money bundles. When they came to the entrance of the park, everything was done.

Bob paid the entrance fee and the ranger gave him an information booklet about the park. According to the booklet, certain routes were closed to private vehicles at certain times of the year. However, the Zion-Mount Carmel Highway, which included the tunnel, was open year-round. He then drove on, with the dopey detective tagging along.

“What are we going to do if Dick Perry doesn’t follow Pete, but us?” Bob asked as he drove past the park’s visitor centre.

“He won’t... if he sees Pete with the paper bags,” Jupiter assured, but there was a hint of uncertainty in his voice. Dick Perry had often surprised them.

Bob followed the route towards the east side of the park. The road became more and more twisty, and finally, they came to the entrance of the tunnel. There they noticed a queue of cars forming and several rangers were positioned at the entrance directing traffic. Bob knew what was going on. Although the tunnel allowed two-way traffic, there were instances when rangers had to convert two-way traffic to one-way to enable oversized vehicles to cross safely. In any case, they had to wait a while until the oncoming traffic had cleared.

Bob used the break to call Jelena, but there was still no answer. “Perhaps she’s away as well for this long weekend...” he reported in disappointment.

Just then, his eyes fell on Dick Perry, who in the meantime had left his car, chatted cheerfully with some children and pretended to be tremendously interested in the sight of the steep mountains.

Finally, the woman who was directing the traffic gave the go-ahead. Bob started the car and drove on. With a dull feeling in his stomach, he rolled into the dark tunnel opening.

Bob was disturbed by the constant presence of Dick Perry. It distracted them from their real dangerous task, which was the exchange of the money for the violin... and if he let himself be distracted too much, he knew from long experience that mistakes could happen.

7. Jupiter Breaks into a Sweat

While driving through the tunnel, Bob slowed down and thus increased the distance to the car in front of him. He needed this space for the next manoeuvre. Just before the exit, he accelerated sharply. This was for Dick Perry to suspect that they were up to something.

When they left the tunnel, they were greeted again by the bright light. As they had hoped, they had a slight lead over Perry, who had reacted too late.

Bob spotted the entrance to a parking area and steered so sharply that the tyres squealed. Then he hit the brakes hard. Armed with the paper bags, Pete jumped out of the car. There was a touch of movie action at the scene, and some tourists shook their heads without understanding.

The moment Dick Perry emerged from the tunnel, Bob accelerated again. All this had lasted only a few seconds, but Perry must have barely noticed the action. In the rear-view mirror, Bob watched their pursuer slow down, hesitate briefly and then turn into the parking area, which Pete was walking across while holding the two paper bags.

Bob relaxed and grinned at Jupiter, who seemed equally relieved. The first part of their plan had already worked out. After two or three turns, they were out of sight, and Bob proceeded to park the car on a sandy shoulder.

“We got rid of Dick Perry,” he said to Jupiter. “This is what counts. Are you ready?”

Jupiter nodded and checked the backpacks. He was calm himself. “The two backpacks with the money, a water bottle, the extortionist’s photos, a small camera...”

“You packed a camera?”

“I might be able to get a photo of the extortionist,” explained Jupiter, “because at the exact moment when I have the violin in my hands, our hunt for the extortionist will begin!”

“Jupe, we shouldn’t take any chances...” Bob warned.

“I’ll be careful, Bob,” Jupe said. “You don’t have to remind me that the priority is to secure the violin. Anyway, don’t get so close to me in case the extortionist suspects something.”

Jupiter got out and hung one backpack over his right shoulder and held the other in his left hand. “If you see me again later, I’ll play a little solo on the violin!” He took one last look at Bob and ran off.

Bob grinned. With a mixture of fear and admiration, he watched his friend go. When it came down to it, the First Investigator really showed nerves of steel.

Carefully Jupiter walked back along the road. The handover was set at 1 pm, so he had plenty of time. Presumably the extortionist was sitting at a strategically favourable position from which he could observe the area and especially the handover location closely. However, up to this point it was still a twenty-minute walk... and the First Investigator did his best to appear calm on the outside.

After a few minutes, he reached the end of a queue of cars. They were the cars waiting to return through the tunnel. On the other side of the road was the small parking area. There was no sign of Dick Perry. Jupiter had to smile when he imagined the obnoxious detective swearing and struggling his way through the boulders on a pointless zigzag course led by Pete.

Just as he was about to turn his gaze back to the front, he noticed a rapid movement. A man had quickly disappeared behind a caravan. Was Jupiter wrong, or did the man look like Hendry, O'Sullivan's butler? Without a second thought, Jupiter hurried ahead, past the waiting cars, into the parking area. Breathing heavily, he reached the caravan. Carefully he crept around it, but there was nobody there.

Voices of children were heard from inside the caravan. It didn't add up. Was he wrong? Jupiter had to proceed with his mission. He couldn't be distracted now. Thoughtfully, he left the parking area and crossed the road.

A small sign pointed Jupiter to the path he was looking for. He looked around once more and started up the slight incline. A family came towards him. Shortly afterwards, he met an elderly couple, and he wondered why the extortionist had chosen such a well-visited place for the handover. Perhaps this gave him the advantage to be able to disappear more easily among the tourists.

Although Jupiter appeared to be unmoved on the outside, his senses were working at full blast. He constantly scanned the area with his eyes for anything unusual. He paid attention to every sound, and he could smell danger.

After a while, Jupiter reached the end of the path. There was a lookout point into the gorge, whose beauty he unfortunately could not stop to enjoy. Nevertheless, he stepped to the fence to have a brief look down. He didn't want to attract attention and kept his cover as a tourist as long as possible.

Then Jupiter turned inconspicuously and looked up the slope, at the end of which were the four boulders—the ones that were depicted in the photograph. On that photo, a cross was drawn on the tallest boulder.

The sun burned down mercilessly from the sky. Jupiter wriggled. The backpacks were a burden, and his sweaty T-shirt stuck to his back like a second skin. If it were Pete, the ascent would have been less strenuous... but he, Jupiter Jones, had to take on this task. Nothing was allowed to go wrong. A million dollars was at stake and an even more valuable violin. Now it was time to act.

He walked between two bushes and made his way up the slope. The hard rock surface was relatively easy to climb on, although now and then, there were crevices in his way. After a few minutes, he felt alone. In fact, he was alone—except for the invisible observer—the extortionist—who was waiting for him somewhere.

Jupiter stopped and looked at the boulder. Was something moving up there? ... Or was it just the flickering of the heat? With each step, he became more and more cautious. It was so exhausting and he just wanted to get this terrible climb over with.

After what felt like an eternity, Jupiter finally managed to pull himself up the slope. One thought kept circling in his mind—this was how the extortionist wanted it. He wanted the bearer of the money to be tired at the handover. This guy was really playing it safe... and he was there, somewhere, watching...

Now Jupiter had reached the first of the four boulders. From where he was, the marked boulder was just a bit ahead. He took out his water bottle and drank several sips. The ascent had made him sweat profusely. When he glanced quickly back at the lookout point, he saw Bob at the fence looking down into the depths with binoculars.

The First Investigator averted his gaze and took out the photo of the violin. For the umpteenth time, he memorized the distinguishing features of the instrument.

Suddenly a loud fluttering sounded behind him. He turned around like lightning. How could he have been so surprised? It was only that he had frightened a bird.

"Hello?" cried Jupiter, when he had calmed down again. "Is anyone there?"

He heard the wind... and birds that seemed to be croaking angrily at him from a safe distance.

"I... I have the goods with me."

There was no response.

Jupe did not want to fall into a trap. He took a long look around, wanting to ensure there was nothing suspicious nearby before moving on. Finally, he approached the designated boulder and walked carefully around it.

"Hello?"

There was nobody there. Where was the extortionist? At the ground next to the boulder, there were only some heavy rocks around... but what should he find here?

Jupiter put the backpacks down in front of him and waited. When nothing happened for minutes, he moved the first rock to the side, but underneath, there was nothing but earth and stones. Then Jupiter moved the next rock... and the next one... and so on. It was a work he hated from the start.

When he wanted to get up to take a breath, he saw something gleaming from under a pile of gravel. Why hadn't he noticed it earlier? Someone had buried something there!

With little effort, Jupiter pushed the gravel aside. Something round came out—the round end of something stuck in the ground that looked like the end of a black violin case! On it, someone had painted a red cross, just like in the photo!

Excited, Jupiter grabbed a flat stone that he could use for digging and completely uncovered the case. Then he carefully pulled it out of the ground. He could hardly believe his luck. Was it that simple? Had the extortionist simply buried the Guarneri violin here in gravel and earth? But what about the money? The money! He had been distracted!

Jupiter threw a hasty glance to the side and exhaled with relief. The backpacks were still there where he left them. He turned back to the violin case. Very gently he laid it down in front of him. With his fingers, he brushed the sand off the two latches and then unfastened them. The latches sprang open.

With trembling hands, Jupiter opened the lid.

8. "See You at Midnight!"

Bob had pretended to be an enthusiastic tourist for as long as possible, but now he didn't care about his cover. While the other visitors let their gaze wander through the gorge, Bob had stepped aside a bit and had his binoculars pointed at the slope.

He saw that Jupe must have found something up there. Anyway, he was squatting down examining something, but Bob couldn't see what it was.

Then Jupiter suddenly straightened up. In his hand, he was holding an elongated black case that looked like a violin case! Bob lost sight of Jupiter in a moment of excitement... but immediately after that, he saw the First Investigator pick up the backpacks that had contained the money. Where was the extortionist? Or had Bob missed something?

Now Jupiter came walking down the slope with the two backpacks and the violin case. Now and then, he stopped and looked around. This reminded Bob of his actual mission and he fleetingly scanned Jupiter's immediate surroundings with the binoculars, but without finding anything suspicious. Then he fixed his gaze again on the First Investigator, who had some trouble cushioning his steps with his body weight.

After a while, Jupiter stopped and took a sip from his water bottle. Bob could hardly resist the urge to run towards his friend, but he did not want to make a mistake. Did Jupiter seem cheerful? Annoyed? Or frightened? It was impossible to tell from where Bob was. He hurriedly walked back to the fence from where he could see into the gorge, and waited.

After several long minutes, Jupiter had finally reached the lookout point. Bob took a small step towards him, but Jupiter let his expressionless gaze wander over him. With a short nod, Jupe signalled that they should make their way towards the car. Bob understood. Jupiter suspected that the extortionist was nearby and did not want to destroy the impression that he was there alone.

So Bob left Jupiter enough distance before he set off on his own. As he slowly made his way back to the car, his head was filled with more and more questions. What was going on with Jupe? The most exciting question of all was whether he had the violin.

However, Bob had to be patient for a while longer. When he reached the car, Jupiter and Pete were involved in a heated discussion with Dick Perry. The head of the sleazy detective glowed like lava while beads of sweat rolled down his round cheeks like marbles teetering on the edge of disaster. His shirt was covered with sweat over his chubby belly.

"Mind your own business, Mr Perry," Jupiter exclaimed. "Just leave us alone!"

Dick Perry retorted: "Not when rookies like you are travelling around with those bags of green leaves and won't tell me what it's about. You clearly need the protection of an experienced detective!" He pointed to Jupiter's backpacks. "When those backpacks break open, every gangster will have a nervous breakdown."

"Mr Perry, do you want to know how you could be of big help to society?" Pete took over. "You can make even the most hardened gangsters consider turning themselves in just for relief from your relentless babbling."

"Look who's talking now?" Perry countered. "Pete, it's damned embarrassing the way you wander around aimlessly."

"Well, who asked you to follow me then?" Pete barked back.

“Don’t you have clients back in Santa Monica?” Jupe said as he took out his handkerchief to wipe his sweaty brow. “How about you spend some time advertising? Chuck leaflets in the mailboxes or cook up more dumb slogans!”

Dick Perry smiled thinly. “If I’m judging the situation correctly, your client should have hired me rather than you. Well, maybe there’ll be another opportunity for me to show what I can do!”

“The opportunity is coming up right now,” Jupiter said coolly. “Please show us your skills of disappearance for once!”

“As you wish, you greenhorns!” Dick Perry spat contemptuously. He then reached to the ground and picked something up. “Here, you dropped this, you amateur!” It was the paper with the extortionist’s clues. It must have slipped out of Jupiter’s pocket when he took out his handkerchief. The First Investigator turned bright red.

Dick Perry made a U-turn on his heel and waddled back to his car like a disgruntled penguin.

No sooner had he disappeared than The Three Investigators went back inside their rental car. Bob and Pete turned their attention to the violin case in the hands of Jupiter, who was visibly upset.

“Did you get the violin?” Bob asked. He could hardly wait, and besides, he wanted to get over Jupiter’s negligence quickly. The First Investigator was embarrassed enough as it was.

Jupiter put the violin case on his lap and slowly returned to his old self.

“Unfortunately, life is no picnic, fellas,” he said in a firm voice, unfastened the latches and flipped the lid up.

Pete and Bob looked at each other in amazement. There was no violin in the case. There was nothing in it at all except for a piece of paper, similar to the one the extortionist had given Mr O’Sullivan.

Disappointed, Pete took out the piece of paper and read what the extortionist had written this time:

CONGRATULATIONS!
SEE YOU AT MIDNIGHT!

“What?” Pete exclaimed.

“Look what’s on the back!” Jupiter took back the paper and turned it over. Bob and Pete saw another map and three more photos. The map had the words: ‘Antelope Canyon’.

“Antelope Canyon!” Pete remarked. “I know that place. I’ve been there before with my parents.”

“Jupe, what do you make of this?” Bob asked.

“This first meeting place was only a test,” replied Jupiter. “The extortionist wanted to verify that O’Sullivan was sticking to the terms. He was probably watching me the whole time. The violin will be delivered at midnight tonight.”

“So Pete, what do you know about this canyon?” Bob asked.

“It’s a slot canyon, very narrow, sometimes just a metre wide,” Pete said. “Sunlight can enter through the opening at the top at certain points—like here in the third photo...” Pete pointed to the paper.

In the photo, they could see the shades of red and brown of the softly polished boulders, leaving only a narrow path between them. From above, the sun threw a thin ray and marked a point on the sandy ground where again a red cross was drawn.

“Only the sun doesn’t shine at midnight,” Bob remarked.

“We will only be able to solve this mystery on the spot,” Jupiter said thoughtfully. “— And where is this Antelope Canyon?”

“At Page... Arizona,” Pete replied, “on land belonging to the Navajo Nation, and it is a sacred site of the Navajo people. It will take us slightly more than two hours to get there.”

“Then let’s not waste time! It would be good not to reach there at the last minute.”

“Hold on there, Jupe,” Pete said. “I suggest that we take a precaution regarding the two backpacks of you-know-what. We should not be putting them together in the car. Let’s hide one of them in the boot, and put the other one somewhere else.”

“Where?” Jupe asked.

“Perhaps under one of the seats,” Pete suggested.

“Good idea,” Jupe agreed, and he handed one of the backpacks to Pete to put into the boot, and he himself slotted the other under the passenger seat.

Then Pete sat down behind the wheel and drove off, while Jupiter and Bob carefully examined the new clues and the violin case once more for any conspicuous features. However, there was nothing.

When he had a good mobile phone connection, Jupiter informed O’Sullivan. The movie producer sounded very disappointed. He probably didn’t expect this kind of development in the case, and he realized that he had no choice but to wait and see.

“First of all, thank you very much, and please try for a second time,” he said.

“The Three Investigators will not let you down, sir,” promised Jupiter.

“Fine. I’ll follow you and find a hotel in Page.”

“Where is your butler, Mr O’Sullivan?”

“At home, I suppose. Why?”

“Just a routine question. We’ll get back to you, sir,” Jupiter cut the connection and put the phone away. “I thought I saw Hendry in the parking area by the tunnel,” he told his friends. “I’d rather not tell O’Sullivan. Did you notice anything unusual?”

“Nothing,” Bob replied, and Pete shook his head.

“Maybe I was wrong.” Jupiter turned and looked through the back window. There was no car behind them. “How did you get to meet up with Dick Perry?” he asked Pete.

Pete grinned. “Better ask how he got to meet up with me. He completed his annual fitness programme for overweight detectives in one day and must have lost a lot of weight...” Pete interrupted himself when he realized that Jupiter was not exactly slim either.

“I also survived my annual fitness programme for overweight detectives today,” Jupiter announced unabashedly, “at least I fared better than Dick Perry.”

“Then let me take the next money run,” Pete suggested.

“The extortionist should have seen me earlier, Pete. He would be expecting me again,” Jupiter insisted.

“It’s dark in the canyon. I doubt if anyone can recognize you.”

“Pete, that’s why people invented flashlights!” Jupe exclaimed.

“They’re the kind of things you can shine in your face in the dark, Pete,” Bob said from behind.

“Since when do you volunteer for dangerous tasks?” Jupiter asked.

Pete was silent. Only by his challenging driving could they tell he was angry.

After exiting the park, they remained on the Zion-Mount Carmel Highway heading east.

“The fat goblin is following us again,” Pete said. “Pretty far behind, but I think it’s him.”

Jupiter was not distracted. “Tricky Dicky has probably put a tracking device on our car after all.”

At Mount Carmel Junction, they turned into US Route 89. About two hours later, they crossed the border into Arizona. Bob reminded his friends to adjust their watches one hour back as Arizona was on Mountain Standard Time.

They crossed the Colorado River via the Glen Canyon Dam Bridge—one of the highest bridges in the country. Without stopping to enjoy the sights, they finally reached the first houses of Page. In the meantime, it became apparent that they had eaten very little all day, and The Three Investigators parked in front of a supermarket to stock up on food and drinks. Then it was the turn of the car and it was given a new load of fuel.

Satisfied, Jupiter put the rest of the money back into his wallet. “One could almost get used to the free life on the road!”

Pete grinned.

9. Canyon at Night

It wasn't long till midnight. From Page, it was only a short distance to Antelope Canyon, the place the extortionist had chosen as the next meeting point.

Pete almost missed the small sandy route that led to a dusty car park. During the daytime, Jeeps started off from here transporting tourists to the canyon, which was a good distance away in the sandy desert. However now, after dusk, the facility was locked and nobody was left on site.

"This is the right place," Pete announced. "I know how to get from here to the handover location."

The Three Investigators left the vehicle next to a barrier and got out. It was lonely, and the wind whistled sand around their ears. Something was rattling incessantly. The sound was scary for Bob. He turned on his flashlight and saw that it was a tarpaulin under which visitors could sit and rest.

Suddenly tyres crunched on the stones behind them. Another vehicle had turned off. They did not need to turn around to know that their permanent shadow had arrived—the sinister snoop.

Dick Perry drove up and rolled down his side window. "Another one of your tricks?" he asked. "I'm not going to let myself be fooled twice!"

"Actually we had planned a new training session for you tonight," Pete grinned and acted quite calmly. There was still time—time to get rid of Dick Perry. "Stand by, Mr Perry! We're going for a little night hike!"

"—And lure me into an ambush, huh?"

"Ambush?" Pete said. "We're not—"

"You annoy me!" Dick Perry put his car in reverse, parked it a good twenty metres back, and stayed in the car. He didn't seem to have much faith in the whole thing.

The Three Investigators took out everything they had bought from the supermarket and sat under the tarpaulin. While they enjoyed the food, they thought about how to proceed further. Strictly speaking, they should just concentrate on the handover, but again and again, they were interrupted by that sleazy detective. The pursuit by Dick Perry had worn them down—more than they wanted to admit.

To make matters worse, Juve's mobile phone rang. It was O'Sullivan, who was so curious that he couldn't stand it any longer and wanted to know if everything went according to plan with The Three Investigators.

"Sure," Jupiter confirmed, hiding their little Perry problem. "I'll get back to you after midnight."

"Okay," O'Sullivan said. "I can hardly wait."

"I know. Please rely on us." Jupiter broke the connection and turned to the Second Investigator who was just trying in vain to protect his sandwich from the sandy wind. "Pete, the call came at just the right time. We should get on with our assignment. Since you have been here before, how can I go to this canyon?"

"Strictly speaking, you'll need a Jeep because our car would get stuck in the sand in no time," Pete said. "Since you can't use the car, you'll have to walk." He pointed Jupiter in the

right direction. “This place is a kind of dried-up river bed. You just have to keep to the centre. At some point, you’ll come across a ridge running across it. Antelope Canyon cuts through this ridge. You might need to spend some time finding the canyon’s entrance. It is hardly a few metres wide. You’ll need our best flashlight.”

Jupiter moaned. Wandering through the sand... in a desert... in darkness—the extortionist really didn’t make it easy for him.

“One undeniable fact, however, is the presence of Dick Perry,” Bob added so that he could suggest his plan. “So, as far as that bumbling buffoon is concerned, this is what I propose... We take turns disappearing into the darkness as if we are going to ease ourselves. First Pete, then me, then you. Pete will secretly take a backpack and leave it by the bushes.” Bob pointed to the undergrowth from which a barely visible black shadow stood out. “When Pete comes back, I’ll do the same with the second backpack. Finally, when I come back, Jupe, you go without taking anything.

“After you retrieve the two backpacks, you don’t come back here but proceed to the handover location. By the time Perry realizes you’ve gone on tour, you’ll be untraceable in the night... In any case, there’ll be Pete and me to stop him.”

“You’re not thinking of a physical confrontation, are you?” Jupiter asked.

“Only in an emergency will I touch that guy,” Pete promised.

Jupiter smiled. “A good plan. I think we should get started. It’ll take me a while to find the canyon... and it might be a good idea to take a look around first.”

“Unfortunately, the plan also has a drawback,” Bob said. “We will not be able to accompany you, so you’ll be completely on your own.”

“I’m used to that,” Jupe said.

They did it as Bob suggested. After a good half hour, Pete and Bob had deposited the backpacks with the money a few metres away in the darkness. Now it was Jupe’s turn. Pete and Bob avoided looking at their friend and acted as lively as possible, keeping a constant eye on Dick Perry’s car.

They hoped he fell for their trick. When Jupiter still hadn’t shown up after several minutes, the sinister snoop got out of his car and waddled to Pete and Bob.

“I suppose this time I should go after Jupiter?” he asked and crouched down with them uninvited. “—Again on some meaningless zigzag path? So that you can have your peace from me? I’m not falling for that again, rookies!”

“Too bad,” Bob said and grinned at Pete. “What a shame!”

Jupiter had quickly found the two backpacks. In order not to attract Dick Perry’s attention, he refrained from switching on his flashlight. The moon was in the sky, and the light was enough to show the way, but it was an arduous walk. This was mainly due to the sandy ground on which it was difficult to make progress.

Clearly, the extortionist was in control of the situation—he set the locations, he set the times, and now, he would be somewhere waiting and watching Jupiter. For that, he probably had the proper equipment, such as a night vision device. The First Investigator could rely on his own intelligence and the fact that he was often underestimated.

One thing was clear to Jupe—after he had exchanged the money for the violin, he would attempt to catch the extortionist. As long as O’Sullivan had his instrument back, he shouldn’t mind... Jupiter Jones wouldn’t let anyone get away with leading him through mountains and sandy deserts!

From the position of the stars, Jupiter realized that he had made a turn. He was probably no longer visible from his starting point, as the raised edge of the river bed blocked the view. In the meantime, his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness. Jupiter had kept his flashlight off, in the hope that the extortionist would not see him... so that surprise was on his side.

It still took quite a while until Jupiter could make out the ridge that Pete had described. It was completely silent, except for the wind that blew incessantly. Jupiter slowed down and sharpened his senses.

A terrible thought came over him—what if the extortionist simply took the money from him without giving him the violin? Jupiter was alone and he had no chance. Would O’Sullivan believe him then? Or would the movie producer think that the three of them had secretly taken the money? Then it would mean all the more to go after the extortionist in order to dismiss any suspicion... but he would worry about that when the time came.

Jupiter had still not found the entrance to the canyon. He could imagine how such openings must have come about—water had dug through obstacles that had stood in its way. Water, cold and heat—these were the architects of the scenic wonders of nature.

Now Jupiter had come very close to the boulders... and there he saw it—a deep crevice in the darkness of the slope. It was the entrance to the canyon.

Jupiter checked the time—there were still twenty minutes until midnight. It had taken him longer than expected. Cautiously, he strode towards the crevice. What was the use of hesitating? He had to get in anyway.

Already after a few metres, complete darkness surrounded him. The opening to the sky was much too narrow to let in some of the light of the stars and the moon. When Jupiter hit his head on a ledge for the second time, he decided to switch on his flashlight, even though he was giving the extortionist the signal that the messenger had arrived.

As Jupiter stepped deeper into the canyon, the light of the flashlight glided over the fascinating curves of the boulders. However with each step, he was wary of the dangers that he would have to contend with.

After a while, he stopped. He had heard something—a fine sound that mingled with the sounds of the wind... or was it? Jupiter listened more carefully. The sound became more intense and swelled up. It was impossible to tell from which direction it was coming, as it seemed to swing from all sides at once. It was the sound—of a violin! It could only mean one thing—the extortionist knew that Jupiter had come.

10. Ghostly Encounter

Jupiter stood still, all tensed up. He held the two backpacks tightly with his hands. The violin music irritated him. What was this all about? What was the extortionist planning to do with him?

The sound swelled, became quieter again, and suddenly voices mingled with it. Giggling, ghastly murmurs that came from everywhere—seemingly directed at Jupiter. He shone his light to the left, to the right, and upwards, but he saw no one. He was alone.

Suddenly, a light flashed among the boulders. Jupe only saw the brief reflection that the reddish-brown boulder walls gently reflected. His first impulse was to run away, but he pulled himself together and walked slowly towards the boulders to see what was hiding behind them.

With each step he took, the laughter swelled, as if to warn him to retreat, until something growled directly behind him. Jupiter turned abruptly and stared into a hideous grimace that grinned at him from above. Jupe was convinced that what he was experiencing here had been conjured up by a mercurial, devilish brain. However, it did not diminish his sudden surge of fear.

The horrible laughter grew louder and louder. The grimace faded, and Jupiter slowly moved away and found himself in a part of the canyon he had not yet ventured into. If he hurried now, he could get out the other side—out of the canyon! That was his only thought now—out to get his head straight again and think about what to do.

Suddenly, something rustled above him. As the First Investigator looked up, something rained on him. He coughed and spat as he found himself enveloped in a load of sand that stung his eyes. He had to crouch down and rub his watery eyes.

“The million,” he thought he heard between all the laughter, “the million, give me the million! And then get out!”

Jupiter had clamped the backpacks between his knees. All he had to do was to give them up. Then he would probably be left alone.

When he had finally cleared his eyes, he stood up and shouted: “Come out, you phantom! You’ll get your million! But only if I get the violin!”

The answer was a laugh... followed by a second load of sand. For a brief moment, Jupiter lost his nerve. He turned and fled. He squeezed himself between the boulders, stumbled over stones in an attempt to get out into the open—until a flickering wall of heat stopped him. His escape route was blocked by a thick burning branch! The flames blazed high. Jupiter turned around and ran... but he faced more fire!

He was trapped. Slowly Jupiter backed away. About halfway between the two sources of fire, there was a rock wall that was less steep. He stopped, switched on his flashlight, and shone it to the top of the wall to see if he could climb out of the canyon somehow... but it was hopeless. It was too high. Even sporty Pete would have had little chance of climbing up there.

Suddenly the laughter died away, and it became very quiet. Even the violin music could no longer be heard. Unwillingly Jupiter crouched down. What kind of surprise awaited him next?

A bright and narrow beam of light came from above. It shone on the sandy ground at a point a few metres away from Jupiter. Involuntarily, he moved towards the spot. The ground was sandy. He bent down and began to dig, first slowly, then faster and faster... until he hit something that sounded hollow.

Barely a minute later, he pulled a black violin case out of the sand. At the same moment, the light above him went out. Jupiter waited a moment and tried to calm his breath. When nothing else happened, he shone his flashlight at the violin case.

It was the same type of case he got from Zion National Park. Jupiter flipped up the latch and opened it. The violin case was empty as well, except for a folded sheet of paper from which a photo fell when Jupiter tried to take it out. He was startled.

It was a Polaroid photo, underexposed, a bit blurred, but still clearly visible. In the photo were Jupiter, Pete and Bob sitting under the tarpaulin at the car park of Antelope Canyon, eating the food from the supermarket.

Jupiter turned the photo around. On the back were written the words:

FINAL WARNING:

NEXT TIME YOU COME ALONE!

The extortionist knew about everything! He was watching them... but as it was, the money hadn't been exchanged for the violin yet, so there had to be another meeting.

Jupiter unfolded the sheet of paper. It had the same format as the previous messages—one map and three photos showing the place and a time—Monday 11 am... and on the map were the words: 'Grand Canyon'. So up next was the largest, deepest and most impressive canyon the country had to offer.

Thoughtfully, Jupiter pocketed the piece of paper and grabbed the violin case and two backpacks. He felt a wave of relief wash over him, knowing that for today, his worries were behind him. Right now, despite the challenges he had just faced, he decided not to think about what might be waiting for him at the Grand Canyon.

He got up and walked slowly in the direction from which he had entered the canyon. After a few metres, he reached the place with the burning branch. In the meantime, the fire had burned down quite a bit. Jupiter decided to let it get even smaller. Now he had time. Now he even marvelled at the strangely fascinating walls of the canyon. He thought when this was all over, he should come back here at another time and admire the place.

When the flames flickered only slightly, Jupiter extinguished them completely with sand. Then he climbed out of the place and made his way back to Pete and Bob.

The way back through the dried-up river bed seemed endless to him, but he was not disturbed anymore.

When he finally saw the car park in front of him, the moon was already much higher. Pete and Bob came running towards him.

Jupiter could read the relief in his friends' tired faces. "It was sandy, it was exhausting, and it was a little scary, even by my standards!" he said faintly. "Again, the only thing I didn't get to see was the extortionist. He is like a phantom—one that prances around you, and you can't catch him. Unfortunately we are no further than before, as there is a third meeting place!"

"You know what? We could probably think of our trip as a kind of wild goose chase," Pete said disappointedly, "and I had so hoped that you would finally bring that violin back with you. As it is, we still can't get rid of the you-know-what! The longer we hold on to it, the more problems we will face."

“—And neither can we get rid of you-know-who,” said Jupiter, pointing to the old mouse-grey Ford from which Dick Perry had just got out.

Perry dragged himself near. He looked rather sleepy, and his suit was wrinkled like sandwich paper. He yawned incessantly without covering his mouth, which was true to his nature.

“Hello, Jupiter,” he grunted and took a critical look at what the First Investigator was carrying. “Ah yes. You still have your two bags of green leaves! But what’s that strange case you’re carrying? Another violin case? Do you collect them? ... Or did you join the Mafia and carry your machine gun in there?”

“Go away, Perry!” Jupe barked.

“My goodness, Jupiter! You should look at yourself! ... Let me in on it! You don’t look as if you’re spoiled by success. You need help, boys—help from a seasoned professional!”

Jupiter thought it was an amazingly long speech for Dick Perry, especially at this hour, but he was just tired. He decided to leave Perry alone and get back to the car with his friends. “Shall we get on with it?”

Pete and Bob nodded, packed their bags and trotted to their car. Meanwhile, Dick Perry had also reached his car.

“Where are we going, Jupe?” Pete asked when he was back behind the wheel.

“Flagstaff... en route to the Grand Canyon!”

“Hmm... Flagstaff?” Pete wondered aloud as he was driving off. “That’s more than two hours south from here. Why are we going there when there should be other towns nearer to the Grand Canyon?”

“The next appointment with the extortionist is on Monday at 11 am,” Jupiter explained. “That’s a whole Sunday off for us, so I guess it’s better to go to a bigger city... where we could again try to shake off that rascal who is now right behind us.”

The First Investigator gave Mr O’Sullivan a brief update via mobile phone. Following that, he filled his friends in with the remaining details about the incidents at the canyon.

“Oh, my!” Pete remarked. “The Grand Canyon is huge! Perhaps we could get some help from a seasoned professional.”

“A seasoned professional?” Bob remarked. “So, who would you prefer—Dick Perry or Dick Tracy?”

“Hmm... neither,” Pete replied. “They’re both comic characters.”

11. Where is Pete?

The sun was just rising when Pete reached Flagstaff. He drove to a nearby camp site where they set up their tent and took a short sleep. They woke up several hours later, and sat together in front of their tent for breakfast.

Why the extortionist had given them this one day's rest was one of the questions Jupiter asked himself. Another question was why had the extortionist pulled off this whole show, only to set a third handover location? Did he even want the handover to happen? No matter how much Jupiter brooded, he did not come up with a satisfactory answer.

Slowly Mr O'Sullivan, with whom Jupiter had spoken on the phone again in the morning, also became nervous.

"Somehow the extortionist got it into his head that you two were in on it," Jupiter said, referring to the Polaroid photo. "Tomorrow we should proceed even more carefully. The guy must have an insane need for security!"

"Let me see the photo again, Jupe," Pete requested.

Wordlessly Jupiter handed the photo over, and Pete looked at it for a while. "Our extortionist must have been waiting somewhere in the darkness of the desert. In the background of the photo you can even see Dick Perry in his car." Pete held the photo close in front of his eyes. "This photo was obviously taken with a telephoto lens. It's not very distorted so I guess that the extortionist was pretty close. I wonder if he's watching us now."

"In any case, we should expect it." Jupiter took a sip of his latte. So who was their opponent? Did Jupe really see O'Sullivan's butler at Zion National Park? The First Investigator's mind then wandered back to their constant companion. "By the way, did Dick Perry follow us to this camp site?"

"Not that I know of when I was driving," said Pete. Somehow he had a bad conscience that they couldn't really shake off the obnoxious detective—after all, he claimed to be a seasoned professional.

"It's amazing that Perry keeps showing up, even when we thought we had given him the slip," Jupe said.

"He's everywhere." Bob remarked. "You try to get rid of him, but he keeps coming back! You know what he reminds me of? ... Cockroaches."

"Yeah..." Pete agreed. "He's Dick 'Pesky' the cockroach."

Meanwhile, Bob checked his mobile phone. Unfortunately, Jelena had not got back to him yet. His gaze wandered into the immediate surroundings. Next to them was the parking area for camper vans.

"By the way, it was a good idea of yours to come here to this camp site," Bob commented, grinning. "Unlike us, I bet Dick Pesky didn't bring a tent."

"He's probably getting himself some wrinkled old rain tarp," Pete said. "I wonder where that fat goblin is... Somehow, I'd rather that we see him than him turning up from nowhere. I swear that guy has more tenacity than sense, but hey, at least he's good for comic relief every once in a while!"

"Anyway, now is a good opportunity to search our car for a tracking device," Jupe suggested. "I bet we'll find something."

The ‘we’ was, of course a gross exaggeration—the search for the tracking device was clearly a task for Pete and Bob. Jupiter didn’t fit under the car simply because of the size of his body. So Pete and Bob lay with their backs on the ground under the car—each to one side. They systematically searched the underside of the car bit by bit. Jupiter sat next to them, sipping his latte, and commenting on their efforts from time to time with unhelpful remarks.

“Pete’s clearly faster than you, Bob!”

“Would you rather that I be thorough or fast?” Bob snapped.

“Whichever of you two finds the device will get a great prize!” Jupiter announced and slurped especially loudly. “The last sip of coffee!”

“I’d rather have a million dollars,” it came out from under the car.

“A million dollars,” said a man behind them.

Pete banged his head against the car in shock, and Jupiter was also startled.

“Ah, Mr O’Sullivan!”

“I wanted to talk to you,” said the movie producer. Restlessly, he stepped from one foot to the other.

Pete and Bob slipped out from under the car.

“Did your car break down?” Mr O’Sullivan asked.

“No, everything’s fine,” Jupiter said quickly. He didn’t want to worry his client with the Dick Perry situation.

“I just wanted to stop by and check on things,” O’Sullivan said, clearing his throat.

“After what you reported last night, I would have complete understanding if you’d give up the job.”

Jupiter shook his head. “We don’t give up that easily, Mr O’Sullivan! We will get the job done! You will have the violin back in your hands.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” O’Sullivan’s features relaxed, and they could feel again some of the charm he exuded. “However, I don’t want to blame myself if something goes wrong. You’re not there yet, and the Grand Canyon is... well, it’s—”

“You mean we are not up for such an encounter, and the Grand Canyon is very, very deep?” Jupiter expressed the thought. “I will be careful. No, you need not worry.”

“—And the money is still here,” Pete proudly announced.

O’Sullivan smiled. “Maybe I shouldn’t worry so much... Thanks... but if something goes wrong again tomorrow, we’ll talk about it again. I’m slowly running out of nerves...”

“I am sure that the handover will take place soon,” said Jupiter. “The extortionist would eventually want the money, and slowly he has tested me enough.” Jupiter suppressed his doubts about the extortionist’s intentions, which had taken root in him after the incidents at Antelope Canyon.

“Fine. We’ll see. Can I still help you? You need a map of the Grand Canyon? Food supplies?”

“We’re going shopping at the supermarket later,” Jupiter said. “You can rest assured that we will not take advantage of your expense money unnecessarily.”

“I don’t doubt it, Jupiter. Then I’d better leave now! I’m staying at the Hotel Sedona in case you change your mind.” O’Sullivan nodded and was about to turn around.

“Have you heard anything from your butler in the meantime?” Jupiter asked.

“Hendry? Yeah, I called him at home earlier. Everything’s okay.” O’Sullivan nodded once more and took off.

“I guess I was wrong about this Hendry after all,” Jupiter said when the movie producer was out of earshot.

“On the other hand, he could still reroute phone calls,” Bob said. “Anyway, let’s keep looking for the tracking device. I’m dying for some cold coffee.”

Pete was lucky. After just one minute, he proudly held a small transmitter in his hand. “There’s the rat—under the passenger door,” he said. “The pesky professional must have put it there at one of the stops. Now what?”

Jupiter had long since thought about this. “We’re going to the supermarket anyway. We’ll just fix it on another car—preferably one from the East Coast...” He smiled. “Let’s give Perry a taste of driving across the country!”

“I have a feeling that O’Sullivan doesn’t really trust us,” said Bob, as The Three Investigators turned into the supermarket’s large car park a while later. “After all, we’re talking about a million dollars and a Guarneri... and the handover has not happened twice.”

“He has no choice but to trust us,” Jupiter said, “and we are not just anyone. I think he chose us quite deliberately.”

“I certainly hope nothing stupid happens,” Bob remarked.

“What do you think, Bob?” Pete asked. “—That the handover wouldn’t work out? We deliver the you-know-what, but we don’t get the violin? Would O’Sullivan buy that?”

“It’s his risk,” Jupiter stated. “Look, we can stop over there. There are lots of cars around, among which we’re sure to find the right one!”

They got out and looked around for a car, preferably one of the same make and colour as their rental one. Luck was with them. They found one with Texas plates which was packed to the roof with bags and clothes. Hopefully, the owner was just passing through on their way back to Texas. While Jupe and Bob kept an eye on the surroundings, Pete quickly bent down and fastened the small transmitter under the car.

Satisfied, he straightened up. “Have a safe trip, Dick Perry!”

“Okay, let’s go get some supplies,” Jupe said. “By the way, one of us better stay out here by the car.”

“I’ll stay,” Pete volunteered.

With a smile on his lips, Jupiter told the Second Investigator: “So, while you are out here, could you please tidy up our car interior and get rid of all the used bags?”

“Yeah, sure, Your Highness,” Pete muttered.

The Second Investigator looked at his two friends going into the supermarket, then he walked over to their rental car. He looked through the window of the passenger seat where Jupe had been sitting, and he saw many chocolate wrappers, empty bags for potato chips, and two empty paper cups thrown into the footwell.

“Sheesh! What a sloppy eater!” Pete sighed, and then he opened the passenger door to begin clearing out the mess.

Some plastic bags found their way under the seat, so Pete had to reach in to get them. He pulled everything out from there and placed them on the seat. That included the backpack containing the you-know-what.

Jupiter and Bob left the supermarket a while later clutching the shopping bags. They had bought drinks and food, plus chocolate bars for in-between meals. In a section with postcards and travel guides, Jupiter had even found a very detailed map of the Grand Canyon, on which he hoped to trace the best route to the location of tomorrow’s handover.

In a good mood, they made their way across the car park to their car... but somehow they must have made a mistake. Their car was not there!

“Here was where we left Pete!” Jupiter said, confused. “Look, the car from Texas is still over there! And we stood there!” Jupiter pointed to the parking space where a red Mazda had just rolled in.

“—But... then what happened? Pete left? Without us? No way. Something is going on, Jupe!” Bob suddenly had a paralyzing feeling in his stomach. Did something happen?

“Pete wouldn’t have driven off with the car,” Jupiter said. “Come on, we’ll go round the car park and look!”

The two of them quickly put their shopping bags inside an empty shopping cart left at the car park, and looked around hastily.

After a while, Bob came up to Jupe and reported: “Nothing! Nothing at all! The car has gone without a trace!”

“I’ll call his mobile phone,” Jupiter decided. It rang, but there was no answer.

In the distance, a seemingly interminable Union Pacific freight train rumbled along the tracks. The powerful locomotive emitted its deep, resonant horn four times... and that echoed ominously in the ears of the two investigators.

12. A Huge Problem

After they searched the car park again without success, Jupiter and Bob grabbed their purchased supplies and ran to the main street. They could do nothing but wait. The traffic rolled past them, car after car, but no sign of their blue Chevrolet.

Restlessly the two investigators stepped from one foot to the other. If only they had a clue... Was Dick Perry behind this? But why would Perry abduct their friend? Or had Pete found a clue and taken off after somebody? But what kind of lead would that be?

Suddenly, Bob pointed to the end of the street. "It's Pete! Over there."

It was true! About a hundred metres away, their Chevrolet came racing up. After a few seconds, the two investigators could see Pete, who was clutching the steering wheel tightly.

"This guy drives like a maniac," Jupiter said, but at least Pete was back!

Jupiter jumped to the side of the road and waved violently to attract attention. Pete raced up. Only at the last moment did he step on the brakes. Dust whirled up. No sooner had the car stopped than Pete got out and circled the car. Apparently he didn't care that the car was in the middle of the road.

"The backpack!" he shouted. "Someone stole it!"

"Excuse me?"

A small line of cars had already formed behind the Chevrolet.

A few motorists honked their horns. Jupiter pushed Pete back into the car and Bob got behind the wheel.

"Let's get out of here!" Jupe said.

Bob drove the car back into the car park and turned off the engine. "Now Pete, please calm down and tell us what happened."

The Second Investigator looked dejected. "One of the backpacks is gone," he said in a whiny voice. "—The one under the seat!"

"Gone? How?"

"I... when you went to the supermarket, I... I began clearing the rubbish under the seat and..."

"You took out the backpack?" Bob burst out.

"Yes, I know. I took it out along with the rubbish and placed it on the passenger seat... and behind me..."

"Someone came up behind you?" Jupe asked.

"Yes," Pete said. "I didn't realize that a car had stopped behind me. I heard footsteps, turned around and looked into a dark—"

"—Into a mask!" Jupiter suspected.

"Yes, a black woollen stocking mask! Only the eyes were visible! The guy also had a knife with him. He reached in and took the backpack from the seat."

"Then what?" Bob asked.

"The robber jumped back into his car. He accelerated and off he went."

"He grabbed the backpack just like that?" Jupe exclaimed.

"I didn't do anything as I was so surprised!"

"Surprised?" Jupiter couldn't believe it.

The money was gone. What a story Pete was telling. He knew that Jupiter shook his head inside. That only made things worse. Of course this would never have happened to the First Investigator. He might be a sloppy eater, but he was careful with many things... but Jupiter was Jupiter, and Pete remained Pete. Pete felt more than bad.

"What kind of car did he take off in?" Bob asked.

"It was a fairly ordinary white Chrysler," said Pete, "with Nevada plates. Maybe it's a rental... I couldn't see the licence plate number. The guy took off like a madman!"

"So you went after him," Bob continued. "What happened next?"

"By the time I pulled out, the man was already on the main road, but I went after him. He went down the road towards the freeway. There were several cars between us—some I was able to overtake. I had him in my sight at all times... and then everything went wrong. The guy reached the intersection with the railway tracks. The barriers were coming down. The guy saw that and turned even though it was red. He just barely crossed the rails!"

"—And you?" Bob asked.

"Of course the fools in front of me wouldn't let me pass," Pete lamented, "but it would have been too late. A huge freight train rolled over the level crossing. Man, there must have been over a hundred wagons! I almost went crazy! After an eternity, the barriers went up again."

"—And then the robber was long gone!" Bob remarked.

"He was," Pete admitted and fell silent. He felt like a pile of misery. "I messed everything up," he moaned.

However, Jupiter did not let up. He just did not want to believe what had happened and his stubbornness went right through him. "Why did you take the backpack out from under the seat?"

"What did you ask me to do earlier?" Pete defended himself. "It was you who ate like a sloppy pig and threw all those used bags and wrappers all around and under your seat. I had to fish out everything there!"

"—But you could have been more careful when it came to that backpack!" Jupe continued. "That's how you get yourself into these kinds of problems!"

Bob stopped the First Investigator immediately. "Jupe, get a hang of yourself! What's the point of arguing about this now? Let's figure out what we should do instead."

He continued: "I suspect that the robber knew we have the money. It could happen to any one of us, and it just happened that it was Pete. Had the robber forced any of us to open the boot, he would have got both backpacks. At least now, he only got one."

Pete looked at Bob with gratitude. It was mighty good of Bob to defend him.

"If the robber knew of the money, why didn't he attempt to get the second backpack?" Jupiter wondered aloud.

"He was acting alone," Pete said. "If he had taken a longer time, I might have put up some resistance... or someone might have seen the incident... or I would've paid more attention to his car... Wait a minute!" Pete exclaimed and slumped down again. "I just remembered something... On the shelf behind the back seat of his car was an orange Dodgers cap!"

"An orange Dodgers cap? What does that tell us?" Jupe blurted out before it occurred to him that the man at the fast-food restaurant had worn such an orange cap. That man had looked so strangely at them when several bundles of the money had fallen to the floor... and that blunder hadn't been Pete's fault. Had that man followed them since then? In the end, it didn't matter. For the time being anyway, around half of the money was gone.

“Sorry, Pete,” Jupiter said after a moment’s thought. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to give you such a hard time. I know we’re a team. I’m just so disappointed.”

Pete nodded. “Forget it, Jupe.”

With half of the money gone, that meant that they could no longer carry out their assignment. It was just embarrassing. After a while, they just sat back in the car, helpless.

“Pete, just admit that none of this is true and that you hid the money... to get it later.” Jupiter laughed. “As crazy as it sounds, this is the situation I’d prefer right now!”

“Do you really think so?” Pete asked sourly.

“To outsiders, the story sounds a bit weird,” Jupiter said.

“Above all, O’Sullivan will think so too,” Bob picked up the thread. “He’s not going to buy our story about the robbery at a car park... is he?”

The idea was not to be dismissed. “Perhaps there were witnesses,” Jupiter wondered aloud. “Did you see anyone around?”

“I don’t think so,” Pete said. “If anyone had seen the incident, they might have come up to me.”

“We have no choice but to inform O’Sullivan,” Bob said.

Jupiter moaned. He was afraid of almost nothing... and he seldom shirked an unpleasant task, except when Aunt Mathilda waved at him with her cleaning equipment. However, when he thought about what he had to tell O’Sullivan, he got really sick.

“Let’s go back to the camp site and count the money in the other backpack so we at least know what we’re talking about,” he suggested.

So he gave himself some respite. The others couldn’t think of anything better, so Bob started the car and drove off.

They almost wished they could see Dick Perry. In fact, he had helped them twice—at the police stop and when he returned the paper with the clues to Jupiter... and hadn’t he also warned them about the man with the orange cap? However, now of all times, no one was watching them. The seasoned professional was probably already on his way to Texas.

They reached the camp site and got into the tent. Disgruntled, Pete opened the second backpack and poured its contents onto the floor of the tent. Then they began to count the number of bundles of money.

“We only have 43 bundles,” Bob said as he stacked the last few bundles.

“So we have exactly \$430,000,” Jupiter concluded, “not even half a million dollars. The robber got the bigger backpack.”

“\$570,000 gone,” Bob said.

Pete took refuge in sarcasm: “If the three of us clean the salvage yard for the next 70 years, maybe we can earn the amount back.”

“With such prospects, I’d rather emigrate to South America,” Jupiter announced bitterly.

It was no use. He had to tell O’Sullivan. With a dry mouth, Jupiter switched on his mobile phone’s speakerphone so that Pete and Bob could listen in... and then dialled the movie producer’s number.

To make matters worse, the man who hired them answered the call.

13. Operation Backpack

With a trembling voice, Jupiter confessed what had happened. When he had told everything, the First Investigator apologized once more to their client: “We are extremely sorry, Mr O’Sullivan.”

The movie producer was silent.

“Are you still there?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes... I...” it came faltering from the phone.

“I know it’s unforgivable, Mr O’Sullivan! And it was a stupid accident!”

“Now... now everything is over.” O’Sullivan’s voice was downright tearful. This was the first time they heard him sound like that. “I’ll never see the violin again! What am I going to tell Fredrik?”

“Mr O’Sullivan, I believe the extortionist will get back to you. After all, he wants the money. Is there any chance of replenishing it? Besides getting back the violin, we will try to catch the robber and bring back the stolen money.”

“How, Jupiter? The money is to be delivered tomorrow. I’m in a hotel in Flagstaff, and my bank is in Beverly Hills. It’s Sunday, Jupiter! How am I supposed to get \$570,000 in cash now? It’s too much for me to handle.” He wrestled with himself. “I would have to deal with the loss.”

“Shouldn’t we notify the police?” Jupe asked.

“Yeah. I think we should,” Mr O’Sullivan said, “around noon tomorrow—right after the meeting with the extortionist.”

“So you still think a meeting makes sense?” Jupiter noted with slight satisfaction, as he had thought similarly.

“Of course, Jupiter,” Mr O’Sullivan said. “I would hand over what is left and simply tell the extortionist what happened. I can only hope that he sees my true intentions. This is my only chance! I can take back this task, Jupiter. If the extortionist accepts me...”

Jupiter thought he couldn’t hear properly. “I hardly think the extortionist will even show his face if you appear. This does not fit into his previous behaviour pattern. Of course we will take care of it, Mr O’Sullivan! After all, we got you into this mess.”

O’Sullivan was silent and took a pause. “Let’s talk again later,” he said, and his voice sounded resigned. “I’ll try to reach somebody at my bank. I’ll call you back.”

Jupiter put the phone away. “Phew!” he said in relief. As tricky as the situation was, he was at least more at ease now.

O’Sullivan had believed them about the robbery. Now they had a chance to make up for their mistake. “There’s plenty of time before tomorrow! Fellas, we have to figure something out!”

“I can think of one way to get O’Sullivan’s money back,” Bob said. “We have to get Dick Perry because he saw the man with the orange cap. Maybe the seasoned professional saw what car the man was driving. There’s got to be some kind of clue.”

“We’ll get to that when we have the violin back,” replied Jupiter.

“What? The violin?” Pete was stunned. “Surely you don’t think O’Sullivan can replenish the money?”

Jupiter shook his head. "That's unlikely, but I haven't given up completely. After all, we still have \$430,000. Maybe I can manage to pretend it's a million. It all depends on the situation at the handover. I must be flexible."

Pete looked at his friend with a mixture of admiration and amazement. "That could be very risky, Jupe!"

"If anybody's got nerves of steel, it's our leader," Bob said appreciatively.

Jupiter had a plan. Bob's mood suddenly improved, but Pete was against it. "If this goes wrong, the \$430,000 will be gone too! Then we will have burned a million dollars within twenty-four hours! Nobody will believe the crazy situation we're in... but I'm holding back. You decide."

"The first thing we need is to get to a photocopy shop—" Jupe began.

"Oh no!" Pete gasped. "Don't tell me we are going to photocopy the banknotes!"

"Look, Pete," Jupe said, "at least we have done it before." The First Investigator was referring to a similar ploy they carried out in *The Case of the Strange Bedfellows*.

"I know, but we did it at Headquarters then," Pete argued. "How are we going to do this out here?"

"We'll manage..." Jupe asserted and was suddenly sparkling with energy again. "Let's get back to the plan... We need to get rubber bands, three scissors, or better yet, a cutting machine. We'll make copies of the banknotes, cut them to the correct size and create new bundles.

"There will be two sets of bundles—one set containing all real money, and the other set with the photocopied money hidden in between real ones. We'll use different coloured rubber bands to distinguish which is which.

"We put the bundles with the photocopied money in the middle of the backpack. At the sides and the top, we put the bundles with all real money. When the extortionist wants to check the money, I expect him to reach into the backpack and pull out any lower bundles from the side. Maybe he'll even make it easy for himself and just take a bundle from the top. After all, he is under time pressure."

"What if he empties out the backpack?" Pete asked.

"We'll have to take the chance that he doesn't. At least there are bundles with all real money. Don't underestimate how you feel when you're close to the finish line. You have to force yourself to be calm. That goes for the extortionist as well. Above all, the man is not expecting a trick. In his eyes, we're not professionals, and so far, we have pretty much stuck to his terms."

"Well..." Pete muttered.

Jupiter frowned. "I know," he admitted. "My plan has its risks, but I must be flexible. If I feel that the situation is becoming unmanageable, I can always turn around, tell him the truth and assure him that he will get the rest of the money."

"If it goes wrong, you risk the violin!"

"I don't think so. The extortionist won't destroy the violin. It is his guarantee for the money."

Pete didn't answer anymore. Jupiter had not quite convinced him. On the other hand, with a little luck, this plan could correct his mistake... and luck had, as he knew from experience, been on their side from time to time.

In the city, they found a photocopy service in a public library. Pete made a thick pile of paper copies of banknotes with Jupiter and Bob screening his actions from watchful eyes. They also

bought a simple cutting machine, and two new but similar backpacks.

Back in their tent, they immediately carried out ‘Operation Backpack’—the mass production of photocopied banknotes. It was a pretty tedious job.

When they had processed a good half of the copied sheets, O’Sullivan called. As feared, he had not been able to raise the remaining sum. He offered to take over the handover again, but Jupiter convinced him to give The Three Investigators another chance. He told him nothing about his plan. It was the trump card that he only wanted to play at the very end.

Bob again called Jelena, but there was no answer.

So the three of them kept working. They felt like they were in a small counterfeiting operation. “If Inspector Cotta caught us here right now...” Jupiter joked, “we’d get ten years in prison!”

Towards the evening, they had finally prepared the two new backpacks to Jupiter’s satisfaction.

Pete and Bob went to prepare food, while Jupiter studied the map of the Grand Canyon that he had bought at the supermarket. He wanted to scrutinize the various routes leading to the handover location.

It wasn’t hard to find the best route. From the southern edge of the canyon, one had to walk along a hiking trail that led into the interior of a huge valley. After a short distance, a small side path branched off, which squeezed itself tightly between boulders and then simply ended in nowhere. It seemed unlikely that anyone would venture here—if entering the path was even permitted.

The photos indicating the handover location had impressively testified to the danger of the place, the numerous boulders and the immeasurable depth of the gorges. Jupiter shuddered involuntarily when he imagined that he had to face the extortionist there alone, but he did not allow this feeling to dissuade him.

“Dinner, Juve!” Bob cried from outside.

Jupiter put the map away and crawled out of the tent. The smell of smoke and freshly grilled burger patties wafted around his nose. The wooden table next to their camp site was invitingly set.

In the cups, Coke was already bubbling. Pete just took a patty from the grill and put it on the plate beside the buttered buns, tomato slices, and lettuce that Bob had prepared.

“Dinner is served, sir,” said the Second Investigator, grinning.

“—As long as it’s not my last meal,” Jupiter replied. “Fellas, you are the greatest! My stomach hangs lower than the wildest gorge of the Grand Canyon!”

“Then let’s do something about it right now!” Bob quipped.

They sat down at the table and proceeded to gobble up the food and drinks. It was a wonderful evening—peaceful, warm and without disturbing wind.

14. Showtime!

Jupiter had slept badly. Over and over again, he had thought about the handover and imagined what could happen and how he would react to it.

It was his way of preparation, so as not to make a mistake in the situation itself, but every now and then, another question overshadowed his idea... Would there even be a handover? Wouldn't the extortionist rather keep the violin... and still collect the money? In the first place, who was this extortionist anyway? Could it be someone from Mr O'Sullivan's movie crew?

Pete also rubbed his eyes tiredly, but for him, it was that the robbery had not gone out of his head. He would be glad that this ordeal was finally over.

The last one to wake up was Bob. Nervous and insecure, he didn't like the fact that Jupiter had to go to such a dangerous meeting.

One after the other, they went to wash themselves. Then they got coffee and crouched down in front of the tent. In the distance, yet another freight train passed by. The piercing roar from the train reminded them of yesterday's failure.

After finishing their modest breakfast, they packed up and left the camp site. They were on track with their schedule, and Jupiter had allocated himself more time to tackle the matter.

After a smooth ride, they reached the Grand Canyon well ahead of time. Jupiter had chosen a car park that was reasonably close to the handover location. Despite the Memorial Day holiday, there were not many visitors yet. They also did not see Dick Perry. In fact, The Three Investigators did not miss him.

From the car park, they could not see the canyon yet. They walked along a path and suddenly they had a full view of the natural wonder. Although they had not come as tourists, they could not escape the magnificent scenery. The canyon was so wide and deep that it seemed strangely inaccessible.

However, The Three Investigators didn't have much time to indulge in such thoughts or even immerse themselves in the sight of the colours and shapes. Instead, they checked if there was a suitable spot at the edge of the canyon from which they could keep an eye on the handover location... but as they had expected, it was completely hidden. So for Jupiter, it would once again be a dance on the rope without a net.

Jupe decided that Pete and Bob should not go with him at all. Instead, they should wait for him at the start of the trail. He did not want to provoke the extortionist unnecessarily.

The First Investigator took the two backpacks that Pete and Bob had been carrying until now. Then he checked the time. "It's just under another hour." He smiled. "You'll see... The Three Investigators will succeed!"

"Most importantly, come back safe, Jupe," Bob said, "otherwise, the two of us have to work to earn half a million dollars each at Aunt Mathilda's labour camp!" Bob pulled a face for fun. "It would be a nightmare!"

"I will not abandon you," Jupiter said, smiled once more and left.

Pete and Bob watched him until he walked around the first corner and disappeared from their view. Jupiter was already very brave. Now Pete was glad that he wasn't in his place.

Condemned to inactivity, the two investigators sat down on a rock and stared into the canyon. Now and then a helicopter flew over them, showing the tourists the spectacular landscape from above.

The sun blazed intensely overhead, and Jupiter was already sweating after just a few minutes. Soon, he found the turn-off he was looking for. A sign warned against entering the path. It was also clear from the state of the path that not many people had used it.

Undeterred, Jupiter ventured onto the path and pressed on. According to the map, he had already covered a significant distance, passing several side canyons. The path dropped slightly and the boulders on the left side got higher and higher. Now and then, the path almost touched the edge from which it went down dangerously steep. Once Jupiter stopped and looked down the cliff. He became quite dizzy. After that, he pinched himself.

Somewhere further along the way, a small plateau was waiting for him, which he knew from the third photo. There, right in the middle, the extortionist had drawn the third cross, marking the handover location. It all fitted—the place was remote enough to keep tourists away, the narrow path was even better for the extortionist to monitor than other places, and in the vastness of the landscape, every noise was lost in case there was a fight.

It wasn't far anymore. Jupiter didn't want to reach there late, but not too early either, so he slowed down.

The First Investigator went over everything again in his mind. His plan was to lull the extortionist to safety and maintain his trust in order to escape a check on the money.

When Jupiter had gone around a steeply sloping boulder, he stopped and took a breather. The descent had led him far down into the canyon and cost him a lot of sweat. Far below, the Colorado River thundered through.

The loneliness made Jupiter feel how defenceless he was. Why had the extortionist attached importance to a physically inferior opponent? Was the man planning to overpower him and then keep the violin and money? At that thought, he flinched. No gun, no weapons, not even a knife was needed here. A small push over the edge into the abyss was enough. He would leave no trace and no witnesses—the perfect murder. Now Jupiter broke out in another sweat, but he forced himself to rest. He had to be careful not to get too close to the edge.

Jupiter wondered how the extortionist would react if he realized that he'd been cheated. He pushed the question aside, picked up the backpacks and started walking. He looked at his watch. Time was running out, and he felt very nervous.

After several minutes of walking, he knew he had reached the part where there was only a ledge left before the plateau. Very slowly, he passed the obstacle. Then he saw it—a cross marked in red paint on the hard ground surface. Jupiter squinted his eyes together and looked closely. Next to the cross, written in red letters, were the words:

LOOK AT THE FACE

The First Investigator examined the spot to see if there was another clue, but there was nothing—just this strange instruction. He had no choice but to follow it.

'Look at the face.' What face? There was no face... Yes, there was! The extortionist had to mean the rock formation that was shaped like a head, which stood out against the sky below the crevice of a massive boulder!

Jupiter sat down on the ground and stared at the rock formation, but what was there to look at? Did it contain any message? After he had thought about it for a while, he came up

with a possible answer. It was very simple. The man wanted Jupiter to look in a certain direction so that he could sneak up on him unnoticed.

Suddenly Jupiter had the oppressive feeling that someone was behind him. The extortionist was there!

It was showtime!

15. Face-to-Face with the Extortionist

“Stay put, boy!” His voice was low, indistinct and muffled, like something was sucking it up. The extortionist was probably wearing a thick mask.

Jupiter didn’t dare to look around. “Yes, sir.”

“You have the money?”

Jupiter pointed to the two backpacks that stood to his left and right. Then he asked: “What about the violin?”

“Here.”

“May I turn around?”

“Sit on the ground and slowly turn around!”

Jupiter sat down carefully and turned around. The man was dressed all in black—jacket, jeans, and shoes. He had put a black hood over his head. His eyes sparkled from two narrow slits. In his left hand, he held a knife; in his right hand, a violin case. The man stood about three metres away from Jupiter. Apparently he came on the same path that Jupiter had taken. With this, he now blocked the escape route for the First Investigator.

“Everything is prepared, sir,” Jupiter said. “Just as you requested.”

“Give me the money!”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “You’ll get it, sir, but who will give me a guarantee that I will get the violin?”

“Nobody!”

“Shouldn’t we make the exchange at the same time?” Jupiter wanted to get up. It was more difficult than he had hoped.

“Sit down!”

“Yes, sir, but please understand me. I need collateral. Look, the money’s here!” Jupiter opened a backpack and pulled out one of the bundles with genuine banknotes. With his thumb, he flipped through the bundle so that the individual banknotes were visible. “I’ll open the other backpack now...”

Jupiter pulled out a bundle that was also prepared and stuck to the side and deeper. “Look, I’ll flip through it for you. All unmarked notes. I’m going to throw you a bundle to check for yourself!”

The First Investigator did just that, and with a soft clap, a bundle landed at the man’s feet. Without letting Jupiter out of his sight, the man put down the violin case, picked up the bundle and flipped through it.

“All right,” he said.

Jupiter breathed again. “Please show me the violin now.”

The man opened the violin case and tilted it so that Jupiter could look inside. That was it —The Servant of the Lord—at least from a distance it looked like it.

“Sir, I have to be absolutely sure,” Jupiter said. “I’m going to take out a pair of binoculars from my backpack.”

“Slowly...” the man said. “Don’t try any tricks!”

“Of course, sir. I don’t have a weapon!” Jupiter pulled out the binoculars and held them in front of his eyes. He adjusted the focus.

Although the man trembled slightly as he held the violin, Jupiter could clearly see the distinguishing features of the violin that he had memorized. “All right!” he said.

The man closed the case and placed it in front of him on a rock.

“Sir, shall we approach each other carefully and exchange the violin and backpacks?”

“Stay! Throw the backpacks over!”

Bummer! Jupiter tried to remain calm on the outside. “You have seen the money for yourself! Money for the violin, please!”

“Give me the money first!” The man raised his knife. “—Or you won’t get the violin!”

“Yes, sir.” Jupiter made up his mind in a flash. It was too late for the truth now. He had to keep the confidence he had gained. Throw the backpacks over? Maybe that was enough for the extortionist and he could leave with the money. On the other hand, if he wanted to check the backpacks, Jupiter had to use the distraction and grab the violin case in a flash before the man noticed the fraud.

The First Investigator zipped up the backpacks and threw them one after the other in front of the extortionist’s feet. The man bent down, opened the first backpack, and took a look inside.

Jupiter was waiting. He put one foot forward and tensed his muscles while focussing on the man’s actions as well as the violin case on the rock.

Then the man reached into the middle of the backpack and pulled out a bundle, which—as Jupiter could see from the rubber band colour—was a bundle with photocopied banknotes. Promptly, the extortionist used his thumb to flip through the bundle. At the very moment when he looked up in surprise, Jupiter leaped forward.

The man cried out. Jupiter tried to grab the violin case, but the man reacted with a quick movement and pulled the case away to the side.

“You cheat!” he shouted. “You’ll be sorry!” With the case, he took a step towards the precipice. Then he opened the case again, took the violin out and held it up.

Jupiter knew what would then happen if the man threw the violin down into the gorge. On impact with the rocks below, the delicate instrument would shatter as if it were made of porcelain.

“No!” cried Jupiter. How could he have let the situation slip away like that? “Don’t throw! Give me a second chance! It’s \$430,000! The rest of the money was stolen, believe me. You’ll eventually get it all!”

“Stolen, huh? What else do you want to tell me?” The man’s voice sounded dangerously pressed. “Is this a trap? Tell O’Sullivan I’m not going to be set up! Not me!” He stepped closer to the edge of the cliff and held out the violin as if he was going to fling it down.

“No!” Jupiter yelled once more. “They... we—” Uncertain about his next move, he instinctively lunged at the man.

“You asked for it!”

It was a lightning-fast movement. The violin soared through the air in a graceful arc, reminiscent of a frisbee. A sudden gust of wind sent the instrument spiralling, prompting Jupiter to go close to the edge of the precipice to track its descent. For a fleeting moment, he envisioned Jelena at the jagged rocks below, her face alight with a smile as she caught the violin, and everything would be right—just as it had been in the past.

Yet, reality shattered that illusion—there was no Jelena, only the vast, bottomless chasm leading to jagged rocks that awaited the million-dollar violin like a set of open blades. The fragile instrument dwindled in the distance, a mere speck before it struck the unforgiving surface of a rock. Fractions of a second later, Jupiter thought he could make out a shred of the

shattered wood tumbling further down. Ultimately, it mattered little when the last remnant vanished from view, swallowed by the depths, leaving only silence in its wake.

Stunned in disbelief, the First Investigator continued staring at the rock—the final resting place of The Servant of the Lord. A million dollars' worth destroyed in mere seconds. Was all that really true?

It took Jupiter a moment to realize that he, Jupiter Jones, the master investigator, had failed—failed as never before in his career.

16. Playing Tag

The extortionist gave Jupiter a tremendous blow. Jupiter bounced back and fell to the ground, staggering. The man then grabbed the two backpacks and ran away.

Jupiter didn't have much time to think, but one thing was clear to him—if he wanted to make up for his mistake, he had to catch the extortionist! He pulled himself up and ran after him.

The man had run back along the path and suddenly disappeared into a tiny spot hidden by a boulder that could not be seen from the plateau.

When Jupiter reached the spot a few seconds later, he realized why the extortionist had disappeared like a phantom—there hung a rope ladder that was hurtling wildly back and forth.

Jupiter looked up. A few metres above him, the man climbed up the boulder. Jupiter caught the bottom end of the rope ladder and started climbing up as well.

Suddenly, one of the tourist helicopters appeared and stopped in the air like a dragonfly. Probably somebody thought that two people playing tag on a boulder was a special sideshow.

Jupiter had trouble just getting up two rungs. It was hard to get a grip on the wobbling thing. The man was faster. He had shouldered the backpacks and pulled himself up rung by rung. By now he had almost reached the top of the ladder.

With a lot of strength, Jupiter climbed the next two rungs. Then his breath faltered. The man had positioned himself on the edge of the boulder. Now he grabbed the knife that he had clamped between his teeth during climbing. With force, he began to hack at the rope ladder.

“No!” Jupiter's hands were desperately searching for a crack in the boulder to hold on to. Now, of all times, his mobile phone rang. Part of the rope ladder was already cut. Juve knew that he had to quickly let go. For a moment, he clung to the boulder face, then he slipped and fell—a good two metres down.

He instinctively rolled to the side to mitigate the force of the impact. Just as his movement came to a halt, his mobile phone slipped out from his pocket, skidded across the rocky ground before going over the edge into the abyss. In a matter of seconds, the persistent ringing came to an end permanently.

The helicopter now came lower and finally hovered directly in front of him in the air. Someone behind the window was waving hectically, and Jupiter saw with some surprise that it was Pete!

With some effort, the First Investigator got up. He felt completely shaken, but apparently he was not injured. To signal that everything was okay, he stuck out his thumb. Pete repeated the gesture.

Shortly afterwards, the helicopter rose higher and flew away. Jupiter hoped that it was pursuing the extortionist. How on earth did Pete get into that helicopter?

A moment later, Juve was alone. Dejected, he made his way back.

Even if Pete could hunt down the extortionist, this was the most disappointing moment of their career as investigators.

When Bob saw Jupiter, he got up and ran towards him excitedly.

“So? How did it go?”

However, Jupiter did not need to answer. He had nothing with him to show for it—no money, no violin, and his face spoke volumes.

“Jupe?”

“Gone, Bob! Over and out. The violin is destroyed! I think I’ll quit my job!”

“You can’t do that! Tell me what happened!”

Jupiter glanced at the helicopter, which hovered at a spot some distance away. “Why is Pete in that helicopter?”

“It was his idea! I thought it was great! He went to the airport that conducts the tourist flights. He was hoping to catch a glimpse of the handover.”

“So he did, including how I fell off the boulder.” Then Jupiter told the whole story, and Bob listened intently.

“You mean that the violin can’t be put back together?” Bob asked when Jupiter had reported the destruction of the Guarneri.

Jupiter shook his head with extreme sadness. “You have no idea how deep that canyon is. The violin cannot be fixed. It’s not possible!”

“Not possible?”

“No, not even if any remains are found.”

“Now what?” Bob asked.

“Now we’ll have to hope Pete finds the extortionist, and then I have to call O’Sullivan. This is gonna be the hardest call of my career.”

“Just pretend you’re in a story, not in reality. Tell him what happened and then hang up.”

“Thanks for the tip, Bob. Would you like to make that call?”

Bob looked at him, startled. “Not really.”

Just then, Jupiter noticed that the helicopter was turning around. “Looks like the helicopter’s going back to the airport,” he said. “Do you have the car keys?”

“That’s with Pete...” Bob said. “He drove to the airport.”

“Sure. Stupid question!”

Jupiter and Bob rushed out of the park entrance and jumped into a taxi.

After a few minutes, they reached the area where one of the helicopters had just taken off. In front of the entrance portal, a police car was parked with its flashing blue light switched on. The taxi stopped right next to it, and shortly afterwards, the two investigators hurriedly crossed the entrance hall. The large glass windows gave a view of the landing area.

Outside, on the landing area, stood Pete. A group of people gathered around him, including two policemen and apparently the helicopter pilot. When Pete saw his friends, he approached one of the policemen, who then let Jupe and Bob through the departure area.

Pete broke away from the group. “There you are at last! We have unfortunately lost the man,” he blurted out. “He disappeared in a tunnel passage, and then he was gone! At some point, the pilot didn’t want to pursue it any longer.”

“So we stand here with completely empty hands,” Jupiter said disappointedly. “How did you even get into the helicopter?”

Pete laughed. “I booked a sightseeing flight. I wanted to see what there is to see from the air. However, the helicopters strictly follow a certain course, but as we flew over the edge of the canyon, I saw you going after the extortionist. I was able to convince the pilot that a crime was taking place there, and she deviated from her prescribed route. Then we saw the number with the rope ladder, and you saw me. When you signalled that you were okay, we followed him, but he suddenly disappeared, and now the police are here, and there’s a lot of excitement.”

Jupiter took Pete aside. “To what extent did you involve the police in our little story? You haven’t told them about the money?”

Pete shook his head in indignation. “What are you thinking of? Confidentiality is part of our business! No, I made the pilot think that I happened to see your tussle with the man.”

“Then I should get out of here before she sees me!” Jupe said. “Anyway, I have to report to Mr O’Sullivan. Bob, can you let me have your phone?”

Jupe grabbed Bob’s phone and walked outside the building. O’Sullivan’s mobile number was already in his head. Less than a minute later, he had the movie producer on the phone.

“So?” O’Sullivan asked expectantly. “It’s taking you forever to get in touch with me! But if it’s worth it—”

Jupiter swallowed. Then he told the whole story—just as it had happened. He didn’t hide his part in the failure either.

O’Sullivan held his breath. “This was not agreed upon,” he hissed when Jupiter had finished, and his tone became sharp: “What were you thinking? You... you amateurs! You have got the violin destroyed! It... it... the incredible...”—now his voice turned tearful—“... the incredible violin!”

“Presumably the extortionist would have destroyed the instrument even if I had poured pure wine for him,” Jupiter replied as calmly as he could. “He wanted the whole sum, and he was extremely upset!” Jupiter paused for a reaction from the movie producer, but there wasn’t any.

“It’s pointless to speculate about what would have happened if I hadn’t wanted to deceive the extortionist,” Jupiter continued. “Unfortunately, everything went wrong... totally... I admit it.”

On the other end of the line there was silence. “Where are you right now?”

“At the canyon airport.”

“We should inform the police as soon as possible! I have made a big mistake. I must apologize for my outburst. It’s not your fault, Jupiter. I should never have gone along with the plan.”

“The police are already here.”

“All right, then hold them there. I’m on my way. I’ll be there in... uh... one and a half hours.”

“In the meantime, should I tell the police everything?”

O’Sullivan took a moment to think. “Yeah... okay. I guess that’s the best thing to do now. If the police can help get back some of my money, that’s probably the only thing I can salvage from this fiasco.”

“Okay, sir.” Jupiter hung up. He could understand O’Sullivan as he himself would not want to involve the police and face their interrogation.

17. A Score to Settle

Jupiter had suspected that the conversation with the police would be very uncomfortable, and he was correct. The lieutenant, who listened to The Three Investigators and the now-arrived O'Sullivan in a meeting room at the airport, was really angry.

With a bullish look, he thundered at Jupiter: "You amateurs! Smash a valuable item and then suddenly the police are called to save what can be saved! Don't think I'm enjoying this, Jones!"

Jupiter wanted to answer, but the policeman rumbled on without a break: "You call yourselves investigators! What kind of a country is this, where every greenhorn can call himself an investigator? Guys, I tell you what—do something useful. Pick up trash if you want to clean up! Or start a rock band for all I care! But please don't mess with police matters!"

"Sir! It's not the boys' fault!" O'Sullivan threw himself into the breach. "I made the mistake myself! I hired these guys. I should have gone straight to the police!"

The lieutenant's anger now spilled over to the movie producer. "This isn't one of your Hollywood movies, Mr O'Sullivan! You can't simply change the script to make it a happy ending! All this came about because you did not dial the police phone number! What were you thinking when you hired these kids?"

O'Sullivan was silent. His face had taken on a reddish expression not unlike the colour of the canyon boulders.

That seemed to appease the lieutenant a bit and he turned back to the facts. O'Sullivan, Jupiter, Pete and Bob were asked to give a full account of what had happened. A second police officer took down the statements. O'Sullivan was first. After him, The Three Investigators spoke. Now they did not hide the continuous hounding by Dick Perry.

"Somehow that guy smelled a rat, but unfortunately he is definitely not the robber at the supermarket," said Jupiter. "Anyone would have recognized that short, round guy immediately."

"Thank you for your statement, Jones. We'll check it out ourselves," growled the lieutenant. "May I please see the photo you told me about?"

"The photo of the violin?"

"No, the photo of the sunset in Hawaii," the lieutenant said sarcastically.

Jupiter swallowed. He reached into his back trouser pocket, took out the photo, and handed it to the lieutenant. The Polaroid photo was now crumpled, and the image was a bit discoloured after having been in Jupe's pocket during all his physical activities in the past few days.

The policeman looked at the photo sceptically. "So Jones, you recognized the violin exactly when you were with that man?"

Jupiter nodded. "As best as circumstances would allow. I'm pretty sure as I used binoculars. As I said—"

"That's all I need to know for now," the lieutenant barked.

"If Jupe is sure, then he's sure," Pete remarked.

The lieutenant looked up. "If I were you, I'd back off a little, Crenshaw! You sank a lot of money!" The policeman frowned and turned the photo back and forth. "I need this photo for our records, but the condition of this is deplorable."

"Uh..." O'Sullivan interjected. "I'll submit to you a proper copy—one that is lodged with the insurance company. Meanwhile, please give me back that soiled copy."

"Do that quickly so that we can complete the documentation of this case." With that, the lieutenant shoved the photo across the table to O'Sullivan.

Finally they talked about what needed to be talked about. After that, O'Sullivan and The Three Investigators were released. They went out of the airport building in silence.

"Well then," said the movie producer. "I have to immediately get home and... uh... figure out how best to tell Fredrik about this... Okay boys... I'm driving to Flagstaff and taking a plane back to LA."

"What about the car?" Pete asked.

"You'll have to return it to any one of the car rental outlets when you are back in LA. After that, you can bring me what's left of the expense money when you come by my place."

"That's very decent of you, sir!" Jupiter remarked.

Then O'Sullivan and The Three Investigators went their separate ways. They had nothing more to say to each other.

Dejected, the three boys made their way to some nearby shops to catch up on their meals and get some supplies. Anyway, O'Sullivan didn't offer the boys the plane route home, and it was improper for them to even ask. So it was to be a long drive home—eight hours at least.

The Three Investigators had failed badly in this case. They had lost one million dollars of their client's money, and not only had they failed to get the valuable violin back, but they had also inadvertently caused the total destruction of the instrument. Sure, the insurance company could cover the loss, but the violin was gone forever.

In the restaurant, the three of them were lost in thoughts and said nothing to each other. The silence was damning. Finally, they decided that they might as well head home and get over with their misery. After stocking up on some food, they got into the rental car, and Pete drove off, heading south on Arizona State Route 64.

To take his mind off the disastrous events, the Second Investigator turned on the radio. Every once in a while, he'd exchange a grumpy word with Bob, who was in the back seat. Only Jupiter was quiet, as he had already fallen asleep—tired from all the mayhem.

At Williams, Pete turned west onto Interstate 40. Just then, Bob's mobile phone rang.

"It's Jelena!" Bob exclaimed, and that woke Jupiter up. Bob immediately switched on the speakerphone for his friends to listen in and then answered the call: "Jelena! Finally! I've been trying to reach you for days!"

"Hey, Bob!" Jelena replied. "Yeah, sorry... I was out of the country with my father. I just came back this morning and got your message. What's going on?"

"Pete, Juve and I have been on a case and are now driving back from Arizona," Bob said. "I'll tell you all about it when I get back, but now, regarding my message, do you have anything for us?"

"I sure do," Jelena said, "and something important too... but first things first... yeah, I did not really need to check too much on that Guarneri violin because I just had to ask my father. He is aware that it was sold at an auction a few years back for over a million dollars—but he's not sure of the exact amount. In any case, he even knows the person who bought it—

an actor by the name of Fredrik Lindgren. I asked him to make a call to this Lindgren just to confirm on things—”

“Hold on!” Bob interrupted her. “Your dad didn’t tell Lindgren about us or our case, did he?”

“No, of course not,” Jelena replied. “In the first place, I don’t even know anything about your case. You just asked me to check on that violin.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” Bob apologized. “Please continue...”

“Anyway, Lindgren said that he loaned out the violin to be used in a new movie. The loan will end in a few weeks from now. In fact, he is looking forward to getting the violin back in time for his daughter’s twenty-first birthday. He is going to give it to her as a present.”

“Oh wow!” Bob remarked. “—A million-dollar birthday present!” Somehow he momentarily forgot that this million-dollar present was now shattered beyond recognition at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

“Yeah, but there is one other thing...” Jelena continued. “Where did you get that violin photo?”

“The movie producer, Frank O’Sullivan, showed it to Jupe.”

“So did you see the actual violin?” Jelena asked.

“I didn’t, but Jupe did.”

“Was it exactly as that in the photo?”

Jupe nodded to Bob.

“Well, our friend here can confirm that the violin he saw matched the one in the photo,” Bob said, “and he has a photographic memory.”

“Yeah, sure—the hallmark of a master investigator. How could I possibly overlook that?” Jelena scoffed. “In any case, there is something wrong with the violin in that photo.”

“What?” Bob exclaimed.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure,” she asserted.

“You’ve got to explain that to us, Jelena.”

For the next couple of minutes, Jelena delivered her observations and the boys, including Pete, who was also keeping an eye on the road, listened attentively. After that she hung up.

“Fellas,” Jupe said as he pinched his bottom lip. “I think we now have the best chance to save this case and restore our reputation as investigators.”

“You’re right, Jupe,” Bob agreed. “How shall we proceed?”

“Now we hurry back to LA,” Jupe said. “We’ll work out the details on the way... Most importantly, we have a score to settle, and we want to settle it tonight... Bob, can you hand me your phone?”

“Who are you going to call?”

“Inspector Cotta.”

18. *La Serva del Signore*

Two and a half hours later, still on Interstate 40, they crossed the Colorado River, leaving Arizona and re-entering California. Fortunately, there was no need to adjust their watches, as both states observed the same time during daylight-saving months.

At Barstow, Pete made a brief stopover at a petrol station for the three of them to stretch their legs, ease themselves, and refuel the car. Without wanting to waste time, they hopped back into the car, and Bob took over the driving—with slightly more than two hours to go.

Bob quickly turned onto Interstate 15 to begin a long and boring drive. However, he was careful not to exceed the speed limit and invite a police car along—also now that Dick Perry would not be here to bail them out.

By the way, where was that annoying detective? Could it be that he was still on his way to Texas? If he were, Bob hoped that he would remain there permanently and never return to California.

Shortly after 10 pm, they were back in Los Angeles. Bob turned off Interstate 10 and made his way to Beverly Hills.

Minutes later, they were at O'Sullivan's front gate. It was closed, so Jupe got out and pressed the intercom button.

Half a minute later, Paul Hendry's voice was heard: "Yes?"

"Mr Hendry, I am Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators... We are here to speak with Mr O'Sullivan."

"At this hour?"

"Yes, we need to speak with him urgently."

"I'll check with him first."

The First Investigator waited for about a minute before the butler replied: "Okay, I'll open the gate for you to come in."

Jupiter hopped back into the rental car, and Bob drove through after the gate opened. The front door was already open, and Paul Hendry was standing in the doorway.

The Three Investigators went to the door and the butler moved aside to let them in. Just then, Mr O'Sullivan came down from the staircase.

"Boys, I did not expect you to come at this hour," the movie producer said. "You could have just come tomorrow morning to return me the money."

"We are not here just to return you the money, Mr O'Sullivan," Jupe replied. "We want to clarify something with you urgently."

"What is it about?"

"Can we speak to you privately, perhaps in your library?"

"Sure... come along." Mr O'Sullivan waved them to follow him into his library.

On entering, Bob took a quick look at the table on which were placed the three violin cases. One of them was opened, and a violin was placed next to it. From a distance, Bob took a good look at the instrument and nodded to his two friends.

"Please sit down," Mr O'Sullivan said. "I was preparing to call Fredrik tomorrow and tell him all about it when I felt so tired after the hectic events of today... but then, back to you

three. What do you want to clarify with me?"

Jupiter nodded to Bob.

"Mr O'Sullivan..." Bob began, "is that one of your violins on the table over there?"

"Yes, indeed. Every night before I turn in, I always play a bit on one of them. I find that very soothing and useful for a good night's rest. Unfortunately, I will miss the sounds of the Guarneri."

"We have reasons to suspect that the violin that was smashed on the rocks of the Grand Canyon was not the genuine Servant of the Lord."

"What?" Mr O'Sullivan exclaimed. "You cannot be serious!"

"Yes, we are," Bob said. "The destroyed violin was a copy... and you knew about it."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"No, if you would allow me to explain..."

"Please do," Mr O'Sullivan said. "I'm all ears."

"We managed to contact our friend Jelena to do a check on Mr Lindgren's Guarneri violin. She confirmed basically what you told us about the auction purchase and the subsequent loan to you. She also told us a crucial detail—the violin in question is a right-handed instrument, as is common with many antique and valuable violins. However, the one that was destroyed, was a left-handed one."

"How could you tell?" the movie producer asked.

"The peg positions, Mr O'Sullivan," Bob replied. "They are all reversed, indicating that the violin is a left-handed model. You tried to deceive us by changing some components around to make it look like the genuine one."

"We now know that a left-handed violin is essentially a mirror image of a right-handed one. The distinction can be made by examining the arrangement of several components, particularly those that are externally visible, such as the four strings, the fine tuner, the chin rest, and the four pegs."

"The four strings are of different thicknesses, and the fine tuner is on the thinnest string, so you just switched them around. Then there is the chin rest—right-handed violins have it fixed on the left side, whereas left-handed ones have it on the right. I can tell that your violin over there..."—he pointed to the instrument placed on the table—"is a left-handed model by looking at the chin rest."

"With the copy violin, you tried to fool us with the chin rest," Jupe took over while Bob fiddled with his mobile phone. "Two days prior to the alleged violin theft, you said that you replaced the chin rest. Well, you did replace it, but with one designed for a right-handed violin. That's because you cannot just simply switch a chin rest from one side to the other. With this new set-up, you took a photo of it, which you subsequently gave to me."

"Finally, we have the four pegs," Bob resumed, "—two on each side of the peg box, but they are not in alignment with each other. Also, they cannot be easily swapped around, so what you did was to cover them up..."—he held up his phone to Mr O'Sullivan. "This is a digital copy of the violin photo you gave Jupe. You grasped the violin in such a way as to cover the pegs, but not all of them, so as not to be too conspicuous. Nevertheless, Jelena noted that the way you held the violin up was awkward—not like how many violinists do. That made her take a closer look. She spotted the peg positions and concluded that there is something not right here."

Jupiter then continued: "Apart from the components that we have mentioned, I deduce that the body of the copy violin is identical to the genuine Guarneri. Therefore, to identify it, you had me focus on the body—the wood-grain pattern, sound holes and so forth—but

nothing about the pegs. Frankly, I've never played a violin before, so I was unaware of the peg positions."

The corner of O'Sullivan's mouth twitched.

"Isn't that how it is, Mr O'Sullivan?" Jupe concluded. "There's no point in denying it."

The Three Investigators waited for Mr O'Sullivan to respond to their accusations. After a moment of silence, he finally said: "Well done... well done... I wasn't wrong when I said you three investigators impressed me... What can I say?"

"Perhaps you can explain to us why you did what you did," Pete urged.

"The loan will expire in two weeks..." Mr O'Sullivan said slowly. "I have grown so attached to it even though it is a right-handed violin. I'm left-handed, but I started off playing right-handed violins. Some years later, I suffered an injury on my left hand, and I could not press the strings well. I then resorted to playing left-handed violins. However now, I can play both types, but I prefer the left-handed ones. The three violins on the table over there are left-handed models. I had them made specially for me.

"When I got the Guarneri on loan, I was so impressed with it that I got a luthier to make a left-handed copy for me for keeps. However, it was nowhere near the quality of the original—not that this surprised me. I wanted to get it copied by another luthier, but the loan was expiring... so I had to do something... something silly."

"We understand that the violin, after its return to Mr Lindgren, is to be given to his daughter," Pete said.

"—On her twenty-first birthday, yes," Mr O'Sullivan said. "She's twenty now."

"So you're prepared to deprive her of this fabulous gift from her father?" Pete asked.

"Judy Lindgren has no talent for music!" O'Sullivan suddenly exclaimed. "She does not have the ability to play such an instrument. Instead, she would do damage to it!"

"That's your personal opinion, sir," Pete commented, "but I'm sure that is not how Mr Lindgren sees it."

"So you wanted to keep the instrument... forever," Jupe added. "It had become everything to you."

They could watch O'Sullivan's features slip away. "I should never have hired you," he said desperately. "Despite your reputation, I might have just underestimated you."

"I can't comment on that," Jupiter said, "but you're right that you shouldn't have asked us to deliver the money for the alleged extortion."

"It was such an ingenious plan," Bob took over. "You spun a fine web. You staged a theft for all to see that the instrument had been stolen and then destroyed."

Jupiter cleared his throat. "—But you needed witnesses for that—someone unsuspecting who could confirm to the police that the violin had been stolen and even... destroyed... only that it wasn't destroyed at all!"

"—And we should serve as these compliant witnesses," Bob said.

"To be more precise... I," Jupiter corrected.

"—But why the three handover locations?" Pete asked.

O'Sullivan was catching his breath. "I don't think I have anything new to tell you. The first location was to test you. Then in Antelope Canyon, with Hendry's help, I put on quite a show. I hoped that from fear, you would leave the money there and run away, Jupiter. You would have returned without the violin, and that would have been enough for me. You would have given the police and the insurance company the story, and everyone would have assumed that the violin was in criminal hands."

"That didn't happen," Jupe said, "so you had to proceed with the handover at the Grand Canyon... Were you there yourself?"

O'Sullivan nodded.

"I didn't recognize your voice."

"The mask, the fabric... and a little acting too."

"So you threw the copy violin into the gorge," Jupiter remarked, "and to complete the fraud, you grasped the right opportunity to get that photo back from the lieutenant. Incidentally, it was a Polaroid photo—where if it is damaged or destroyed, you could say that there is no other copy."

"You told the lieutenant that you would submit a proper photo for the police records—one that was lodged with the insurance company... and more importantly, one that shows the genuine right-handed violin. If the insurance company investigates later, no one would probably have noticed anything suspicious—especially when the photo is the same one lodged with them."

Pete took over the interrogation: "I now suspect that you were involved in stealing from me the backpack containing part of the money. It was to give the alleged extortionist a logical reason to destroy the violin. Did you carry out the robbery at the supermarket car park?"

"That was Paul," O'Sullivan said.

Pete then remembered something. "There was also this orange cap in the robber's car—"

"—To put you on a false trail... I got the idea from—"

"Dick Perry!" Bob exclaimed. "You got that buffoon on our tail to keep us on course! That's why he saved us at the police stop on the way to Las Vegas. The police finding the money would have jeopardized your plan!"

"Perry has indeed done a good job," O'Sullivan stated.

"Why did he fall for some of our diversionary tactics?" Pete asked.

Jupiter took over the explanation: "—Because his role was just to keep an eye on us and not hinder the handover process. He just played along, and that was easy for him as he was just being his usual annoying self."

"How much did he get for his services?" Bob asked.

"Ten thousand dollars..."

"That's eleven thousand dollars too much," mumbled Pete, shaking his head.

O'Sullivan laughed fiercely. "You don't really like him, do you?"

"We despise him," Pete said.

Jupiter then said grimly: "Mr O'Sullivan, as I'm sure you'll understand, we have to report our findings to the police. In fact, we have already called Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department. That should cost you quite a bit of punishment... but you probably have good lawyers."

"I hope so," O'Sullivan said without much conviction. His eyes looked into the void.

"So now I have a very important question..." Jupiter said and took a pause for effect, as he so often did. "Mr O'Sullivan, where is the genuine Servant of the Lord?"

Mr O'Sullivan did not reply. Instead, he got up and went over to a cabinet. He entered an access code on a keypad and opened the door. There he took out a black violin case, placed it on the table, and opened it. The three boys got up and approached the table.

There it was—*La Serva del Signore*—intact.

O'Sullivan carefully took the violin and the bow out from the case. A smile flashed across his face. With a slight movement, he started to play. As the bow glided across the strings, an enchanting melody from another era pierced through the air, weaving a tapestry of sound that even captivated the small audience who were not enthusiasts of classical music.

For the entire duration of this brief performance, none of them said a word, as the rich, warm tones emanating from the 18th-century master creation carried all their thoughts away.

